

American Aphorism: A Genealogy of Anti-Foundational American Literature

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Abstract

This study identifies a strain of American literature that resists integration into a progressive construction of the American *mythos*. The texts admitted under this lineage display a set of rhetorical strategies and paradigmatic concerns that are inherently aphoristic. Aphorism is the trope of the fragment. It breaks away from its context and slips out of time. At the same time, however, due to its radical logic, it also draws attention to its own construction and to the conditions that surround it.

The literary texts studied here operate in this fashion and, in their extreme disruption of their cultural environs, foreground complex philosophical issues related to history and progress. It is against this canvas of foundational, and more importantly, anti-foundational, thought that this genealogy is composed. In this way, these aphoristic literary texts often act as speculative manifestations of contemporaneous philosophical crises, particularly those relating to the nature of representation and subjectivity.

It is in these two fields that this study reaches most of its conclusions. However, the impact of these disruptive texts on the consideration of America is also investigated. The results of this enquiry reveal an often elided contingency between aphorism and the very genus of American rhetorical structures.

*She said: What is history?
And he said: History is an angel
Being blown backwards into the future
He said: history is a pile of debris
And the angel wants to go back and fix things
To repair the things that have been broken
But there is a storm blowing from Paradise
And the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards and into the future.
And this storm, this storm
Is called
Progress.*

*"The Dream Before (For Walter Benjamin)"
Laurie Anderson*

Now the shore is divided in its very outline, and there are effects of anchoring, collapses of the coastline, strategies of approach and overflow, strictures of attachment or of mooring, places of reversion, strangulation, or double-bind.

"The Post-Card"
Jacques Derrida

Truth in the Margins: The Aphoristic Text

I

In an essay entitled “Nietzsche/Derrida, Blanchot/Beckett: Fragmentary Progressions of the Unnamable” Stephen Barker describes an imagined circus act: Nietzsche and Derrida are talking through “speaking cups” in a “conversation outside time” positioned at either end of a “...parodic tightrope...” upon which two figures, Blanchot and Beckett, take part in a “...tropic dance...”¹ Barker’s arresting image of the intricate relations between philosophy and literature and the perils inherent in both, where an entry onto the tightrope of discourse is always counteracted “by the danger of a fall”, foregrounds the hazards inherent within any entry into the “tropic dance” of writing.² The writer, like the tightrope walker, risks the collapse of performance into disaster and so progresses into a field necessarily defined and limited by that risk of collapse. The tightrope, the line between Nietzsche and Derrida that Barker draws throughout his essay, traces a dangerous track for the tightrope walker to cross. As thought that hangs suspended in midair, the tightrope marks out the space around it but provides little to get across on. Its dangers, however, are also its merit, for in its parodic nature the tightrope bisects the space between lofty thought and low comic action. The tightrope walker who trips and falls is the very emblem of grace brought low; the dancer turned clown. In both guises, as the dancer sliding across the humming wire or the clown crashing towards the ground, it is the boundaries of possibility, either breached or broken, that draw gasps from the crowd who watch on.

Barker’s conversational high wire, upon which literature crosses philosophy, draws attention to the connecting devices that maintain contact between the two. Beckett and Blanchot dance the vertiginous *pas de deux* of the trope, a point which brings into focus

the rhetorical nature of any engagement between the two fields. Both literature and philosophy rely on tropes to provide balance or stability to their ventures into space; both step out to test the limits of what the physical or metaphysical world can support. Such writing is liminal. It lets in risk. It is written at the margins. It is the discourse of the fragment. And discourse that tests the limits must necessarily appear fragmentary because its function is to curtail traditional metaphysical and narrative structures. In this way it is both disruptive and speculative. In rhetorical terms such writing might be described as aphoristic: that which, according to Derrida “separates ... terminates, delimits, arrests ... define(s).”³

By traditional definition, aphorism functions as a truth or insight presented in a concise or pithy form. The word “aphorism” is derived from the Greek *aphorizein*, meaning to mark off boundaries or to enclose. Aphorism has historically been a form particular to philosophical writing, in which brief statements containing final truths are enclosed within the bounds of the structure. This relationship between aphorism and truth is constructed from a complicity between content and structure, where the self-containment inherent within the philosophical aphorism necessarily limits the meaning of the content held within. The visually apparent opening and closing of the aphorism are the rhetorical markers of truth and do not seem to allow for attenuation or debate. In this sense, Hippocrates’ description of aphorism, as a detail of truth so factual as to be medical underscores this further.⁴ Similarly, Francis Bacon, extending Hippocrates’ definition, argues that the trope of aphorism is the means by which new knowledge can be created from old knowledge, and that “this delivering of knowledge in distinct and disjointed aphorism doth leave the wit of man more free to turn and to toss, and to make use of that

which is delivered to more several purposes and application.”⁵ In her study of aphorism in Wallace Stevens’ poetry, Beverley Coyle compares the truth status of aphorism with the inscription of the pointing hands that appear in the margins of early scholastic and later Renaissance texts: ☞. William Painter’s edition of Chaucer, for example, has these printed hands in the margin so that readers who might be uninterested in the narrative can easily locate the moral or truth of the text. As Coyle argues: “The hands say, in effect, “Look. Here is the general truth of this matter, the law, the rule of conduct it offers to be taken to heart by you. This is the message, the given.””⁶

Given this historical relationship between complete enclosed truths and aphoristic form, it is not surprising to note that in comparison to other philosophical forms, the aphorism has a reputation for a lack of complexity. In fact, to describe a piece of writing as “aphoristic” is often to imply its brevity or its didacticism, rather than to indicate its cogent delineation of argument or its elegance of expression. The aphorism hovers within a space marked as final truth, and as such is rarefied, perhaps atrophied, in its containment. It is this contained and enclosed structure that leads Coyle to define aphoristic form as “... a brief statement, whether isolated or in a larger verbal context, whose formal and thematic elements together create in the reader a sense that what is expressed is both final and stable”,⁷ a statement which reveals the closure of aphorism; that “finality” and “stability” allow nothing further to say or do once the gem of truth has been aphorised into text.

On the other hand, to return to the Greek etymology of aphorism as Derrida does in “Aphorism Countertime”, it is possible to reconsider these claims to finality or stability

and, more particularly, to enclosed truth. If aphorism is traditionally viewed as the vehicle of rational thought, thought which posits an epistemology bound by reason and by claims to truths that simply *are* and so require no further justification, then its employment in any field of thought that, by contrast, resists rational truths and refutes the bedrock of reason is itself a destabilising and arresting act. By its definition, aphorism marks out boundaries, it encloses and maps the borders of truth. In anti-humanist philosophy, then, the use of aphorism does not put a container around stable truths at all, but instead is the vehicle by which truth claims are actually upended. Situated in the margins of writing, aphorism draws attention to form, to rhetoric or to trope and, in doing so, reveals the struggle to keep truth claims enclosed. The aphorism is not the structure of completion, but is the modality of the fragment. The enclosures that it marks out are frail and ragged; the circumferences that it draws are marked with the remnants of other meanings still visible at their margins.

In employing aphorism, philosophers of the fragment, like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, or Baudrillard, transgress the boundaries of discipline and cross over and between discursive categories. Their mobilisation of the aphorism, for example, in Baudrillard's claim "Were it not for appearances, the world would be a perfect crime"⁸ or Heidegger's insistence that "The earth appears as the unworld of erring star"⁹ inscribes poetry into metaphysics, collapsing the two and calling forth new modes of writing and new ways of reading. As Stephen Barker argues:

The resultant radical *synaesthesia* produces incandescent fragments as enigmatic as Heraclitus's, and like the Heraclitan fragment simultaneously infused with wit and weight, with an unbearable lightness and an inconceivable portentousness.¹⁰

The effect of aphorism in anti-foundational philosophical writing is not to create fixed and stable truths, rather, aphorism functions as a supplement of truth, an *ars poetica* that points to the ragged edges of all truths while it is being employed.

In “Aphorism Countertime” Derrida provides an account of the form and content of the aphorism within the context of a discussion of Romeo and Juliet. Written in response to a production of this work in Paris 1986, Derrida reveals the play’s deeper resonances with a Western *epistme* that sees history as both logical and progressive. His analysis demonstrates this foundational view of historical truth elides the inescapable proliferation of events and the factors of mishap that interrupt it. Derrida calls the conditions that allow such interruptions *contretemps*, which in the French describes the idea of an accident or an inopportune occurrence, as well as signifying, in musical terms the sense of being “out of time” or “off-beat”.¹¹

Derrida’s central argument in “Aphorism Countertime” is that the network of history, with its structure of names, dates and events, cannot contain the effects of *contretemps*; those ruptures of accident or design that operate against the process of reasonable progress. He describes the drama of Romeo and Juliet as the drama of time versus counter-time, where the trappings of reasonable history “Dates, timetables, property registers, place-names...” are arrested and contravened by the mechanisms of *contretemps*: “... misunderstandings, false steps, wrong moves...”¹² Derrida argues that Romeo and Juliet’s literary potency lies not only in its account of tragic love and desire, but also in its performance of the wider tale of Western history:

But if this drama has thus been imprinted, superimprinted on the memory of Europe, text upon text, this is because the anachronous accident comes to

illustrate an essential possibility. It confounds a philosophical logic which would like accidents to remain what they are, accidental. This logic, at the same time, throws out the unthinkable: an anachrony of structure, the absolute interruption of history as deployment of *a* temporality. What happens to Romeo and Juliet, and which remains in effect an accident whose aleatory and unforeseeable appearance cannot be effaced, at the crossing of several series and beyond common sense, can only be what it is, accidental, insofar as it has *already* happened, in essence, before it happens.¹³

The paradox of accident here, as Derrida shows, is that the conditions of *contretemps* are not accidental, but are instead the very base of all that we perceive as being historically and narratologically legitimate. Without discordance there would be no Romeo and Juliet, and similarly, without the counter rhythms of accidental events there would be nothing from which we could pick out the tune of “history”. In this way, Derrida characterises time as at once synchronous and anachronous; an aleatory dimension in which accident rules and the future has always already happened.

And, as Derek Attridge points out in his introduction to “Aphorism Countertime”, Derrida writes using an aphoristic form, so mirroring the simultaneously organised and dispersed view of history presented in the essay. This is not news to the reader of Derridean theory, popularly regarded as resistant and ephemeral in its construction, more like poetry than philosophy perhaps. As Attridge argues, the traditional critical essay is “...an attempt to produce a homogenous spatiotemporal continuum, and Derrida chooses in its stead an aphoristic form characterized by disjunction and heterogeneity.”¹⁴

“Aphorism Countertime” is constructed from thirty-nine numbered paragraphs containing analyses of Romeo and Juliet that range from the opaque to the oblique. Derrida uses the aphorism in this essay to both explicate and complicate the structure and narrative of a drama which he says is “...imprinted and superimprinted on the memory of Europe ...”¹⁵

revealing through form the manner by which history's seemingly straight forward narrative masks "...infinite distance, the multiplicity of worlds, everything that renders possible a *contretemps*..."¹⁶

For Derrida, aphorism's deferral of closure underlines the nature of writing and, more widely, that of meaning and history itself. If, as he argues, the process of signification defers meaning and leaves it floating freely in a field of proliferating signifiers, then the aphoristic fragment would seem to be a suitable form through which to articulate this condition:

The fragment knows of no proper itinerary which would lead from its beginning to its end and back again, nor does its movement admit of a center. Because it is structurally liberated from any living meaning, it is always possible that it means nothing at all or that it has no decidable meaning. There is no end to its parodying play with meaning, grafted here and there, beyond any contextual body or finite code Its secret is rather the possibility that indeed it might have no secret, that it might only be pretending to be simulating some hidden truth within its folds. Its limit is not only stipulated by its structure but is in fact intimately confused with it.¹⁷

Contrary to those traditional definitions that describe the way in which the form and content of the aphorism contains and stabilises meaning, Derrida holds that aphorism resists analysis and destabilises final meaning. Its fragmentary nature underlines the tenuous position that writing attempts to maintain between order and chaos and its ultimately futile effort to create meaning using the imperfect code of language. Derrida's discussion of Romeo and Juliet demonstrates this through the structural and paradigmatic concerns of the essay, showing that the disordered nature of aphorism is precisely the experience of *contretemps*. Accidents, mishaps and deaths not foretold: these things define the drama and, by extension, provide the fabric from which the history of the Houses of Montague and Capulet are cut. In this way, Derrida shows us a narrative not

only of enlightenment or progress, but a story of instability and uncertainty, randomness and accidental tragedy.

II

It is one thing to argue the aphoristic quality of a literary text. It is another, though, to argue for this same description be placed over objects or figures which exist beyond literary boundaries. Nonetheless, Derrida's discussion of aphorism in "Aphorism Countertime" takes the notion of the aphorism much further than the limits of Romeo and Juliet. His argument also suggests that while an aphorism may simply be a "...device of rhetoric..."¹⁸ it also has the capacity to "...hand us over, defenceless, to the very experience of countertime..."¹⁹ which is to say that sometimes rhetoric behaves as a Trojan horse: its benign exterior brings with it a far more devious and dangerous exposure than first apparent. Aphorism may not be just the exposure to *contretemps* within literary texts, but may in fact indicate the pervasiveness of *contretemps* itself within the very material of culture, and within the means by which culture reproduces these conditions as history, representation and subject positions. This complicity or duplicity between literary and cultural rhetoric is nowhere more evident than in America. America, from the first, was colonised under the agency of rhetoric. Its primary and subsequent grapplings with identity are inextricable bound up with the figurative.

We are as a city set upon a hill, in the open view of all of the earth; the eyes of the world are upon us because we profess ourselves to be a people in covenant with God ...²⁰

In its inception in text as a city on a hill, America is constructed within the order of the rhetorical. The Puritan vision of predestination, of being "a people in covenant with

God”, fashions a dualistic rhetoric in which the elect stand opposed to the preterite, the unchosen. The conception of a New World, unsullied by the affairs of the Old necessarily mirrors these categories: America the elect, stands within the light of God’s gaze and is chosen to proceed towards eternity; while Europe, the preterite, represents the realms of evil from whom God has turned His face. This nation-shaping dialectic informs the construction of American voices, American conceptions of subjectivity and at the most central point, it fashions an idea of America itself. In the trajectory of American thought and writing, the function and purpose of an American rhetoric of dualism is seen at work: inside/outside; city/frontier; East/West and more obliquely, White/Black; Self/Other; male/female; mind/body. These binaries form the material out of which an idea of an American national identity might be created.

In binary logic, the terms of an opposition are never equal. In maintaining its position, the dominant element always seeks an elision of the power strategies that enable its rule, and an obfuscation of its opposite. This is evident in the figuring of America as a city on a hill, and also in those wider discourses through which America, its power bases and its intellectual traditions, are established. Such strategies present the dominant discourse as “natural” or “proper”, and reveal what falls beyond its scope to be transgressive or sinister. This is one strand of the American intellectual tradition. It is the tradition that seeks order so as to contain disorder and it seeks unity even in the face of clear disunity. F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance is an emblem of this scholarly method. In this central commentary on American literature the work of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne and Whitman have their internal contradictions resolved and brought to rein in the service of these wider unifying paradigms of a coherent America.

Even among those who would seek to unmask the ideology of this unifying impulse, a reinscription of binary logic twice removed is evident. Consider Sacvan Bercovitch's project to reveal the constrictive legacy of Puritan America in the ideology of capitalist America, for example. In works such as The American Jeremiad, he describes the way in which the Puritan founding texts operate as vehicles of social control, providing the ground from which the tradition of the self-reliant individual can spring.²¹ According to Bercovitch, these modes of Puritan thought are ingrained into the fabric of America itself, reproducing and reinventing themselves within the wider history of the nation. However, while this view may reveal something of what Bercovitch sees as the moral foundations of American culture and their complicity with power structures, problematically, it ends up reinscribing the binary logic that it appears intent on correcting, and ultimately, totalising the subject of its focus. Puritan discourse is simplified and flattened. Its complexities are elided. As Bercovitch silences the "Augustinian strain of piety" he draws a veil over the process by which dominant discourses are constructed into power bases, and so constructs another of his own. His method in this is like that of Matthiessen and his successors, the Americanist critics. It is essentially symbolic, constructing a narrative description of America based on a closed system of meaning that he inscribes into these central texts.

If America is a figure of rhetoric, it is not a symbolic one. America's construction within a matrix of binary terms and the way in which these terms are reinscribed within the intellectual project with which America is enmeshed, does not contain and verify it as fixed or stable truth, conversely, it draws attention to those excesses of culture that refuse

enclosure within the limits of these binary terms. These cultural excesses, the texts that refuse the order of mimetic narrative, the closed signifier America, constantly work to refer attention to the boundaries of binaries themselves. They operate aphoristically as the “moral hand” in the margins of the Renaissance imprint. This time the pointing hand says, “Here is where the rules breakdown. This is the border.” In this way the “the city on a hill” is not just the bright towers of paradise gleaming under the light of the covenant, but also encompasses what lies beyond the city, what exists on the periphery of the hill.

To speak of America, then, is to enter into the poetics of the trope. While the American intellectual tradition in its unifying impulse imposes closure and meaning onto speculative and accidental texts and transforms them into allegories or symbols of a totalising metanarrative “America”, these texts themselves continue to dodge closure and to evade meaning. They open the way for aphorism and usher in the conditions of *contretemps*.

III

An aphorism is exposure to *contretemps*. It exposes discourse – hands it over to *contretemps*. Literally – because it is abandoning a word to its letter. (... In the beginning there was *contretemps*. In the beginning there is speed. Word and deed are *overtaken*. Aphorism outstrips).²²

Throughout “Aphorism Countertime”, Derrida emphasises the inextricable link between the two terms that construct his title: aphorism is the figure of rhetoric that allows the conditions of countertime, or *contretemps*, an entry into discourse. And *contretemps* signifies both the idea of an accident, or mishap, of chance or speculation, and in a

musical sense, being “out of time” or “off-beat” in “countertime” to some dominant melody. As a figure of rhetoric, aphorism is necessarily a material construction. It is defined by its status as textuality, by its position as a mark or mode by which, traditionally, truth is made final. *Contretemps*, or countertime, is the state of being that aphorism allows into the textual field. It is the wrenching apart of closure to reveal disjuncture; the recognition that logic has been undercut by chance. Aphorism writes countertime. It translates chance into words or worlds, and exposes its readers to the conditions that it presents.

An aphoristic text, then, is to some degree accidental. It is a text in which chance or mishap hold sway, a point primarily evident in the form of the writing itself. The aphoristic text exhibits a radical disruption of traditional or contemporaneous modes and structures. Even when it seems to represent something in a formal or stable manner, it calls attention to its own formality and stability, thus undermining those claims completely. It interrupts the seamless transfer of reality into representation by foregrounding its status as text, drawing attention to its speculative employment of disorderly representational strategies. Further, because of this disorder at the level of form or representation, the aphoristic text is also out of its own cultural time or context. Simply put, it stands out from other texts around it in that its employment of forms or its delineation of thought seems so extreme. Indeed, the extreme nature of these texts’ representational strategies inevitably produce correspondingly extreme and anachronous versions of subjectivity.

Like the trope of aphorism itself, aphoristic texts are primarily fragmentary. They display fractured narratological structures, both in terms of their material construction and also in the interruptions they drive into the spatiotemporal continuum. Often in these texts, progressive narrative sequence is disrupted by tangential forces. Narrative tools, such as point of view or contextual environments, also fail to cohere. On a metatextual level, the discursive systems that ordinarily allow the reader to negotiate the textual transaction they are entering into are piecemeal and fragmentary. The sum effect of these fragmentary narrative structures is the production of discord and atonality.

In the same way that atonal music relentlessly reminds the listener of its musicality and its musicology, aphoristic texts emphasise and play up their own status as constructions of rhetoric. Jumping from one discursive key to another, these texts refuse our impulse to construct stable fictional ontologies and distance us from such a possibility throughout. Instead, aphoristic texts display a certain cold cleverness in their heightened self-reflexivity that is unsettling and chilling for the reader. And if coldness and discomfit characterise the tonal moods of these texts, then so too do their rhythms leave the reader uncomfortable and somewhat at a loss. In their jerky constructions these texts displace any anticipation of the flow and pace of discourse, which is constantly interrupted by the force of the off-beat or syncopation within the texts.

The reason for the pervading sense of rhythmic interruption and atonality in aphoristic texts is in part due to their failure to conform to set generic categories. Within such texts, genre can be uncertain or indeterminate. Texts that appear to be constructed as one categorical form, may prove to be something different altogether. Aphoristic texts are

often constructed on the borders of genre. They may infuse one generic code with another, thereby radically altering both. In such texts, genre is a collapsing and unsalvageable mode of interpretation, a meaningless and emptied reading tool.

The collapsing categories of genre evident within the aphoristic text signify wider collapses at the paradigmatic level. Most particularly, such texts examine the status of the subject who is caught in the play of cultural and intellectual eddies. Aphoristic texts limit stable subjectivity by drawing attention to the subject's construction as a figure of language or a function of narrative. They do not offer us mimetic characters with which to identify or smooth our passage through textual spaces. This fractured central organising consciousness constitutes a further distancing between the reader and the process of reading such texts. The treatment of the subject draws attention to the degree to which ontological structures and categories, like genres, are impossible to maintain under the conditions from which aphoristic textual subjects are born. In this way, their presentation of consciousness is oppositional to codified forms of Western subjectivity. Very often in these works, the self does not perform, act or do, rather it is the material upon which wider forces act. In this way, the aphoristic subject destroys the order of the Cartesian *cogito* and displays its origins as epistemological fiction.

As noted, aphoristic texts reveal the fallacies of a stable time-space continuum. When this continuum is disrupted, the ontological certainties of the self-aware and fully present *cogito* are also profoundly destabilised. In this way, the aphoristic textual subject, while refusing the modality of the Western subject, may take on alterior subject formations. The subject of the aphoristic text may be transmogrified into Eastern forms of self, or it

may be reconstructed out of the remnants of other competing intertextual subject positions. It may even do away with a notion of subjectivity altogether and show only the lines of force with which it has been obliterated. Most radically, aphoristic texts may *speak* the position of obliteration, speculating on the possibility of a language to articulate the ruins of the all-controlling binaries of dominant Western codes, speculating on a modality that might exceed language itself.

IV

The aphorism or discourse of dissociation: each sentence, each paragraph dedicates itself to separation, it shuts itself up whether one likes it or not, in the solitude of its proper duration. Its encounter and its contact with the other are always given over to chance, to whatever may befall, good or ill. Nothing is absolutely assured, neither the linking nor the order. One aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other, each can survive the other ...²³

Derrida's description of the syncopated structure of aphoristic text describes in part his own approach to writing. A Derridean essay is notoriously wilful in its resistance to traditional teleological argument or standard academic exposition. Derrida, in this sense, is an aphorist; a writer who speaks the conditions of *contretemps* through the rhetorical and the epistemological layers of his work. Considering this, it is surprising that Derrida's essay "Aphorism Countertime" has not yet been significantly brought into discussions of literary or cultural conditions, as it offers a certain insight into his own modality. Like an aphorism, it may be that this essay's brevity and ephemeral nature allows it to be read as a given; just another hand in the margin pointing out what has already been said in more detail somewhere else. Conversely, however, the possibilities of placing Derrida's revision of the aphoristic trope over a genealogy of anti-foundational

American thought and writing seem compelling when we consider the degree to which America is essentially a construct of rhetoric.

In seeking a closer study of aphorism and the conditions of countertime, this thesis examines American literary texts exhibiting the key note of aphorism to argue that aphoristic texts occur at crucial points in American cultural history when dominant or foundational modes of thought are exceeded by conditions which, at least momentarily, jolt them out of stable time and into *contretemps*. The texts analysed reveal aspects of American literary experimentation which may well have been discussed substantially in readings elsewhere. The purpose of this study, however, is to replace the consideration of stylistic radicalism with a consideration of how this radicalism is embedded into the American rhetorical ground itself and how in different ways each of these texts drives a new stake into this ground.

The key texts for consideration emerge from what could be described as the American “counter-canon”; those works which, while sometimes already positioned as canonical in other senses, nonetheless, do constitute an organising principle for American literature which is conferred with a certain received internal logic. Which is to say, these works are already considered to “fit” together and have, at least in part, been mentioned side-by-side in other places. However, it is not the intention here to reify such a canon, or to argue that it presents a coherent and intentional strain that in some way counter-balances other kinds of criticism already imposed onto the body of American thought and writing. This is why the texts discussed can be considered, in Foucault’s terms, a genealogy rather than a canon. A genealogy suggests the presence of similar traits or characteristics, and this

thesis will suggest that the links between the texts discussed function as genealogical connections, rather than indicating progressions of influence, as might be implied in the concept of a canon. Rather, in the discussion of these works, and more specifically, in positioning them within contemporaneous historical and cultural terrains, the idea is to determine the degree to which aphoristic modes of rhetoric, representation, and ontology complicate and arrest all kinds of canon-formation, counter or otherwise. While this discussion looks at these texts chronologically and in successive order just as a canon might indeed be constructed, the purpose is to demonstrate that the accelerating level of derangement within the cultural and historical fabric of America is simultaneously written back into that fabric as aphorism.

It is for this reason that each chapter considers in varying degrees the historical, critical and ontological conditions from which the texts under discussion emanate. The purpose is to construct a map of sorts that might chart a course around the textual terrain. Each text is brought into view with a discussion of the critical projects with which it is surrounded. In some cases, the critical territory is substantial, and so the discussion is necessarily extensive, in other cases, the critical ground is ice-thin, sometimes even virginal, and so the subsequent discussion is similarly brief. It is significant that several of the texts carry a largely traditional critical weight, while others, have their scholarly baggage flagged “theory” rather than “criticism”. The genealogy of American aphorism is, indeed, to some extent survey of the fading of criticism and the ascent of theory. In all cases, this thesis seeks to provide a speculative material history from which each text was produced. Such an activity is necessarily prosaic. The purpose, however, is to position the “facts” surrounding the texts as so many strands of extra and inter-text within which

they are enmeshed, yet which they overflow and exceed. Aphorism, in this respect, turns material history to wreckage.

The first text for consideration here is Herman Melville's Moby-Dick. From a canonical point of view, this novel does hold a culturally central position as a "master narrative" of American literature. Indeed, F. O. Matthiessen's canon-forging study American Renaissance positions its as *the* central text of American literature. Moby-Dick is without doubt a touchstone of American culture, however, this is not because of the reasons that have been generally noted about the work by the massive critical project that surrounds it. Moby-Dick is, in fact, a liminal work, a textual gateway through which modernity enters the American scene. Through aphoristic investigations of representational forms and questions of being in the novel, Melville points to wider cultural problematics particularly centred around the motif of the "Name", or Derrida's conception of the subject position that sits at the heart of the text.

In The Education of Henry Adams, further focus on the destabilised subject is placed within the context of profound disturbances in the material of American culture at the turn of the nineteenth century. The disembodied narrative voice "Henry Adams" and the figure of the manikin speak of the forces which fracture being into multiple and ultimately anti-humanist modes. The trajectory of this self transformed by the forces of radical materialism is towards chaos rather than synthesis, a point which is examined with regard to the relationship between the material and the subject as they encounter each other in language.

The Education of Henry Adams concludes by prophesising not only the accelerating force of historical “becoming”, but also the incursion of the “popular” into the field of culture. Adams’ premonition of a coming displacement of the high/low divide is realised in the work of 1950s Beat writers Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. The third set of texts discussed here, On the Road, Dr. Sax and The Dharma Bums by Kerouac and Naked Lunch by Burroughs show the destabilising potential of popular space through self-reflexive and intertextual means. Beat texts speak the conditions of radical breakdown in representation and subjectivity. This breakdown is the rhetorical mode of the aphoristic.

Kathy Acker’s work, the focus of the last chapter, foregrounds many of the same concerns that Kerouac and particularly, Burroughs discuss in their writing, however, Acker’s work more than these writers, speculates the possibilities of an escape from the ruined rhetorical groundwork of late twentieth century America, out of the loop of language and away from its construction in oedipal binaries. Her abject characters chart violent journeys through abject landscapes wrecked by the forces of an insatiable and all-pervasive capitalist excess. They seek sites of resistance or alterity and may even reach the recognition that such modes of being may be possible.

Prior to any discussions of literature, however, this study offers an extensive consideration of the conditions of *contretemps*. The first chapter details the means by which *contretemps*, the material of anti-foundationalism and of aphorism, emerged, and considers what these conditions emerged against and how these conditions have been constantly contested throughout the last several hundred years of epistemological inquiry. Beginning with Descartes, the line of foundational thought that leads through Hegel and

Marx and into later Marxist models is traced. Against this, the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida as key anti-foundational theorists is discussed, examining their notions of reason, history, and being in the context of foundational claims about the same categories. Around these key philosophers other thinkers who either influenced or added to their work are considered. Subsequently, this chapter also contains discussions of a number of other important works that, in conjunction with the wider scope of this discussion, led to the profound crisis of being during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

V

This thesis concludes by examining the movement of aphoristic rhetoric from the margins of American thought and writing to the mainstreams of contemporary culture. It suggests a radical transformation in central Western concepts, namely representation and subjectivity, and a resulting shift in the nature and experience of contemporary modes of being. With the dissolution of boundaries between high and low forms, between genres, between art production and corporate production, the idea of a rational self, located within an understandable historical context, has become increasingly complicated. A study of aphoristic texts and the anti-foundational philosophy that forms their backdrop, excavates the origins of this complicated and increasingly ahistorical subjectivity.

¹ Barker, S. "Nietzsche/Derrida, Blanchot/Beckett: Fragmentary Progressions of the Unnamable", *Postmodern Culture* V 6.n.1, September, 1995, retrieved from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.995/barker.995>, Feb 8, 2002

² Ibid

³ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Derrida, J. *Acts of Literature*. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p418

⁴ Cited in Coyle, B. *A Thought to be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983, pp13-14

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p13

⁷ Ibid, p3

⁸ Baudrillard, J. *The Perfect Crime*. NY: Verso, 1996, p1

⁹ Heidegger, M. *The End of Philosophy*. Stambaugh, J. (trans). London: Harper & Row, 1973, pp106-107

¹⁰ Barker, S. "Nietzsche/Derrida, Blanchot/Beckett: Fragmentary Progressions of the Unnamable", *Postmodern Culture* V 6.n.1, September, 1995, retrieved from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.995/barker.995>, Feb 8, 2002

¹¹ See the translator's note in Derrida, J. *Acts of Literature*. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p416

¹² Ibid, p421

¹³ Ibid, p422

¹⁴ Ibid, p416

¹⁵ Ibid, 422

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Derrida, J. *Margins of Philosophy*. Bass, D (trans.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p133

¹⁸ Derrida, J. *Acts of Literature*. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p419

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Bulkeley, P. "The Gospel Covenant", in Heimert, A. & Delbanco, A. (eds). *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985, p120

²¹ Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978

²² Derrida, J. *Acts of Literature*. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p418

²³ Ibid, p419

Loomings: Foundationalism, Anti- Foundationalism and American Thought and Writing

I

...what is being mourned with such vehemence is not the disappearance of history, but the eclipse of that form of history that was secretly, but entirely related to the synthetic activity of the subject; what is being mourned is the development that was to provide the sovereignty of consciousness with a safer, less exposed shelter than myths, kinship systems, language, sexuality, or desire...what is being mourned is that ideological use of history by which one tries to restore to man everything that has unceasingly eluded him...

Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge¹

In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault identifies the intimate link between traditional historical thinking and the construction of Western subjectivity. According to Foucault, any revision of historical discourse must necessarily focus on subjectivity as its cornerstone. It follows then, that traditional histories support, and are supported by, the construction of subjectivity, while analyses of the kind promoted and practised by Foucault must, by necessity, attack it.

The antagonism between these two strands of thought broadly encompasses two key positions: the first is a foundational one which posits a set of beliefs that emerge from a rational, progressive or teleological view of human history and being; the second is an anti-foundational view, where notions of subjectivity and history are imagined as a series of discontinuous eruptions. This chapter will suggest that the tensions that emerged between these two modes of historical thought during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries profoundly changed the nature of metaphysical inquiry and, more particularly, the nature of representation and subjectivity within the literary text. Alongside and interlaced with an overview of these strains of thought, this chapter will broadly consider the revolutions that these tensions caused in the nature of literary production in a general sense, and more specifically, within the rhetoric and *mythos* of America.

Throughout this analysis of the historical and philosophical “grounds” that allow this thesis to stand, it will be evident that Foucault’s historicising of Western subjectivity as providing a “safer, less exposed shelter”² for consciousness has the strongest of resonances with the genesis of American identity. In many ways, the archetype of the Puritan meeting-house and the Puritan sermon provide a “shelter” for the American consciousness in the form of a shared history and a discourse of freedom and progress. However, this community of consciousness and privilege comes at a price, and indeed, many of the anti-foundational texts analysed in this thesis set out to expose the cost of this transaction.

While the philosophical jostling of foundational and anti-foundational conceptions of history in American cultural production form the framework of the discussion, of equal importance are the discursive modalities employed by each. It goes without saying that the discourse of progress is enclosed within the language of reason and is spoken from the position of the stable and rational subject. The anti-foundational, on the other hand, speaks from the margins, makes bold use of the speculative, and comes to us in fragments, often appearing to be so fragmentary as to deny its own lineage. Defining this lineage is at issue both in terms of the immediate purpose of this chapter and in terms of the structure of the argument as a whole. This is because mapping that which is antagonistic to traditional history requires an alternative schema. Foucault’s notion of genealogy provides such a model:

Genealogy does not oppose itself to history as the lofty and profound gaze of the philosopher might compare to the molelike perspective of the scholar; on the contrary, it rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for origins.³

Unlike traditional progressive histories, Foucault argues that genealogy is not concerned with origins, but with traits that persist over and in and out of time. Like the reappearance of recessive genetic traits, the elements that make up a genealogy need have no continuous connection. In fact, Foucault's dismissed analogy of the mole may not be as inappropriate as he contends, in that genealogies can have a particularly subterranean aspect, and resurface in disparate cultural and temporal sites. Genealogy as a method is important here, firstly, because it informs and structures anti-foundational discourse, and secondly, because it provides a model for the connections between the literary texts that are made throughout this study.

II

In his analysis of foundational views of history, Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo imagines rational history as a progressive march through birth and tribulation towards a moment of possible transcendence, framed within a Judeo-Christian language "... the history of salvation, articulated in terms of creation, sin, redemption, and waiting for the Last Judgement...".⁴ This progressive *episteme* emerges during the Enlightenment in the work of Descartes, specifically in his all-encompassing notion of reason. In Cartesian terms, reason is understood to mean a coherent and ordered intellectual procedure of knowing arrived at through clear and distinct evidence. Cartesian thought rejects all claims to truth that could not be guaranteed with absolute rational certainty, and regarded all knowledge systems to be inherently illusory. Further, Descartes argued that reason exists, not for its own sake, but specifically as the machinery that allows rational inquiry to work.

Cartesian conceptions of reason produced a correspondingly rational understanding of being. Descartes proposed that it is only in the processes of rational thought that the

subject is able to prove its own existence and that it is in this moment of self-knowledge that the constitution of an individual with an autonomous selfhood occurs. The Cartesian *cogito* is constructed, then, in terms of its difference from other non-rational modes of thought. The ideal of a rational being is also the ideal of a subject freed from the constraints of the body and the soul. The Cartesian subject is pure mind and comes into being only through the process of thinking. The body and soul, by contrast, must always be considered untrustworthy or illusory.

The implications of Cartesian notions of reason and subjectivity for literary production are far-reaching and historically resonant. Apart from providing a set of principles which would form the basis for the construction of fictional worlds, Descartes' *cogito* granted the subject a position through which fictional thought could be internalised. The literary subject or narrator was able to speak from a position of privilege because of its ability to see and articulate the mechanisms of its own consciousness. It could literally apprehend itself in the act of thought and report this apprehension from the centre of the text. Further, the Cartesian subject had powers of divination beyond the limits of its own mind and could see into the minds of others. The resulting third-person narrator offered an eye on the world that, in its full presence, brought all other beings into the orbit of its authority. In concert, these principles form the basic requirements for any kind of literary "realism".

Ironically, as David Carroll points out in The Subject in Question, these formulations of subjectivity find their zenith just before the linguistic/structuralist turn, in the French New Novel and its phenomenological reception as an idealisation of subjectivity.⁵ He argues that in Barthes' early phenomenological literary theory, the narrative subject is idealised as the site through which the objective world passes and is

made present to the reader. Following phenomenological principles, perception is considered by Barthes to oppose traditional critical schema that would assign meaning to texts through already existing systems of interpretation, such as those offered by philosophy, history or politics. Rather phenomenology “... teaches us to look at the world no longer with the eyes of a confessor, a physician, or of God... but with the eyes of the man walking in his city, with no other horizon but the spectacle before him, no other power than that of his own eyes.”⁶ For this reason, the narrative position in the New Novel is necessarily a first-person view, spoken from the interior or stream of consciousness, revealing these moments of self-apprehension as they occur.

The high modernist text represents the apex of the relationship between Cartesian thought and literary production. Poised as it is just before the linguistic turn in theory, its understandings of literary production replace the model of mimetic or objective realism with what is described by Alain Robbe-Grillet as “subjective realism”, or a “total subjectivity”.⁷ Carroll explains this notion: “The new realism is subjective in that it is totally dependent on a subject who is the unique origin of the novel, origin of his perceptions, experiences, desires, and dreams, and ultimately origin of his own language – a man who narrates himself... .”⁸

III

In Continental theory prior to the advent of structuralism, the Cartesian *cogito* is the agent of all origins; however, as John Carlos Rowe argues, in American literary production the self was always a contested site. In his study of Henry Adams and Henry James, Rowe connects nineteenth century Western metaphysical crises to nineteenth century literary production in America, arguing that the subject position

produced at this nexus emerges as always “evasive and inscrutable”.⁹ The sense of the subject’s agency expressed in Barthes’ early theory is never the case in canonical American literature. Here, as Rowe argues, Cartesian dualisms are confirmed not in the form of a centred and coherent “self-narrating” originator, but rather, in the implicit search within these texts for a “transcendental center for the structures of thought...”.¹⁰

Rowe’s view of the American subject confirms the interconnectedness between literature, metaphysics and America’s own rhetorical foundations. He notes that within this rhetorical tradition are two conflicting, yet entwined conceptions of America that he defines as the dialectic of progress and revolution.¹¹ Progressive visions of America emerged from a general sense that history was predictable and continuous. Rowe gives Puritanism’s reliance on a seventeenth century philosophical tradition as one example of this. On the other hand, revolutionary notions of America establish the dissimilarity between the New and the Old Worlds, so positing the need for revolutionary models of thought and writing to be invented in order to reflect this disjuncture. The construction of such revolutionary models would be the task for the American writer, according to this view. Rowe further argues that from this point of revolution, it was assumed that a synthesis with European models would eventually ensue, when a “reciprocal” relation between America and Europe could “affirm their very independence from this tradition.”¹²

In part, this independence from Europe was marked from the outset of American self-hood by the definitive relationship between the subject and the state. America’s formation within the terms of a Rousseauian social contract represents the next stage in this history of foundational principles. The Cartesian subject, with its ability to

reason in a fully self-aware fashion forms the centre of Rousseau's political philosophy. In the notion of social contract, Rousseau offers a model of society in which the natural freedoms primary to the subject are put up for rational exchange with the State. The State offers civil freedoms based on mutual social agreement between it and the individual who, offers some sacrifice of its natural freedoms in return.

Rousseau's notion of social contract provides a link between the subject and the realm of the social that subsequently informs the nature of literary production. In literature this exchange of freedom for State protection is problematised and infused with a sense of loss. The rational subject, who sacrifices freedom to the order of the general good, is necessarily the subject in deficit. This deficit forms a key literary tension in which the self grieves over its displacement from nature in the relinquishment of its primary liberties. The concept of social contract suggests an equal exchange of one form of freedom for another. However, often in literature the representation of this transaction is tinged either with nostalgia and mourning for that originary loss, as for example in the pastoral idylls of Romantic poetry; or more pointedly, this transaction is configured as an essentially counterfeit exchange, as in Dickens' novels, for example.

This struggle between the desire for individual "natural" freedoms and the rational understanding of the general good is a central underlying motif in American literature. In The Machine in the Garden, Leo Marx argues that the tension between these positions is an essential strain in American writing that manifests itself as a dialectic between nature and industry. In Marx's discussion, the work of "the best American writers"; such as Hawthorne, Twain, Melville or Thoreau, convey the complex

relations between wilderness and civility and reveal them as manifestations of the key modes of American consciousness.¹³ Marx argues that the tension between freedom and control set up within works such as Melville's Moby-Dick, or Hawthorne's "Ethan Brand", foregrounds wider tensions that form the substance of the American psyche, and because of this is primary to the mythical process informing American writing.¹⁴

These defining concepts of reason and subjectivity, freedom and control, find their philosophical culmination in the work of Hegel. Hegel's work bridges the divide between Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity and the social and coming era of modernity, as Laclau and Mouffe have noted:

Hegel ... appears as located in a watershed between two epochs. In a first sense, he represents the highest point of rationalism: the moment when it attempts to embrace within the field of reason, without dualisms, the totality of the universe of differences. History and society, therefore, have a rational and intelligible structure. But, in a second sense, this synthesis contains all the seeds of its own dissolution, as the rationality of history can only be affirmed at the price of introducing contradiction into the field of reason.¹⁵

Hegel's version of history sees the world as a flow of dynamic epochs moving to a moment of *telos* and uses the lens of Enlightenment reason to structure this teleological vision:

The only Thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History is the simple conception of *Reason*; that Reason is the Sovereign of the World; that the history of the world therefore, presents us with a rational process ... Reason ... is *Substance*, as well as *Infinite Power*; its own *Infinite Material* underlying all natural and spiritual which it originates, as also the Infinite form – that which sets Material in motion.¹⁶

Hegel explains each phase in the teleological development of history as *Geist*, or Spirit. This notion of Spirit is heavily reliant on a subject formed within the Cartesian *cogito*, and provides the link between the individual subject and the social world.

Hegel argues that Spirit is the opposite of matter and, just as matter is defined by its essence, gravity, so Spirit is defined by its essence, freedom.¹⁷ Under this analysis, matter will always tend towards self-destruction because of its composite nature, whereas Spirit already contains its own centre and so always tends towards coherence.

The subject's progress towards freedom, then, is revealed as a series of overcomings, in which various stages of history synthesise one another eventually culminating in freedom. In the dialectic process the germ of opposition in originary material overcomes imperfection to forge perfection. From a wider perspective, the dialectic allows a view of history that is dynamic and progressive. David Carroll makes a cogent connection between Hegel's thought and its importance for particularly realist literature:

Realism raises fiction to the level of speculative thought, it proves its greatness just as the Spirit does in Hegel's Phenomenology by manifesting itself in its other, by figuring and synthesising the radical contradictions which constitute it.¹⁸

The heroic structures of Hegel's dialectic, with its tripartite process of negation, overcoming and resolution, informs both the structures and criticism of realist literature. One might add that for a critic like George Lukács it is impossible to imagine the novelistic form without some notion of historical progress, or a critical enterprise that has not dealt in one way or another within the mechanics of Hegelianism.¹⁹ Similarly, the American critical tradition has continuously imposed these dialectic principles onto American texts even, as this study will demonstrate, when the texts themselves seem structurally resistant to it. The critical project that surrounds Melville's Moby-Dick is a prime example of such a project.

In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx developed Hegel's central concept of the dialectic into historical materialism. The fundamental proposition of historical materialism is that it is not consciousness that determines existence, but rather it is social or material existence that determines consciousness. Marx transforms the dialectic from a dialectic of the Idea to a dialectic of human progress within the social world. He demystifies the process of history to understand it as humanity's own creation and development of itself through labour. On this materialist basis the process of the Hegelian dialectic is radically altered. Marx's theory seeks the source of human self-consciousness in material reality rather than in Spirit. He critiques the Hegelian notion of history for its appeal to Spirit, and finds that while the categories of overcoming create a totalising logic of progress, this progress should be grounded in the conditions of material labour. For Marx, the real measure of progress is the ability and potential of humans to master nature and subjugate it to their own requirements. Indeed, Henry Adams cites Marx as an essential to a modern education and in The Education of Henry Adams material and its employment in human endeavour is a central consideration. Here matter - tools, lines of energy, motion or mass - is not an enabling strategy for human progress, but rather, is a force of propulsion that directs the "education" of the subject throughout.

Marxist thought also impinges more widely on American literature and literary theory when the relationship between the notion of the real and the representation of the real is considered. The eye of the novelist is, in Marxist terms, always narrowed by its own ideological position and representations of reality remain constructs of an embedded ideological state. David Carroll explains this with recourse to Lukács' theories of writing, where the realist novel is considered to be the highest form of art

due to the realist novelist's ability to announce him or herself as a participant within the narrative process:

Simple observation of the real is in fact never sufficient, because observation is governed by ideology. The realist novelist is, therefore, not a simple observer, but a participant... But realism remains a form of observing, nevertheless; it is simply a higher form, *the true form*.²⁰

However, in the texts considered here, it is the nature of the real itself that is foregrounded, rather than any central effort to mediate the real. The material impinges on and drives these texts, but it remains elusive and contingent whenever it is apprehended.

IV

The central tenets of reason, scientific method, autonomous subjectivity and progress, then, inform the basis of Western foundational epistemology. However, this epistemology, traced as history here, should not be considered in any way, "historical" or "past". As a mode of thought, foundationalism remains in a central role to contemporary understandings of thought and being. Everywhere the discourses of rationality and science are privileged and similarly, thinking, speaking and writing are organised around the terms of progress, a point which Foucault historicises in The Archaeology of Knowledge²¹. While these central categories of foundational epistemology form the basis of a metaphysics that underpins the experience of contemporary everyday life, they do not prop up culture unconditionally. Indeed, their validity continues to engage theorists and philosophers in a conflicting conception of history and progress and the mode of existence implied within it. Foundational thinking places humanity at the centre of the universe. And although Descartes, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx differed significantly on their interpretations of what this meant, they all worked from the foundational certainty that humans were

essentially rational beings of coherent subjectivity, able to progress towards various versions of freedom.

The certainty of a positivist, humanist position, however, does not stand unopposed in the history of thought. In fact, it has been contested since Plato's objection to the rhetorical nature of Sophistic thought. Sophistry's contention that all knowledge is contingent and that rhetoric is epistemic allows the argument that rhetoric should stand as the central element in the construction of knowledge systems and world-views. For the Sophists there were no privileged non-rhetorical discourses and no privileged non-rhetorical knowledge systems. Sophistic thought was most profoundly re-articulated and developed in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, during the nineteenth century and Martin Heidegger in the mid-twentieth century. Their work is crucial to an understanding of the aphoristic nature of the texts that will be analysed in the following chapters.

Nietzsche and Heidegger's work establishes the platform for alternative understandings of reason, history, science and being; those categories, shaped during the Enlightenment, that continue to be played out in contemporary philosophy.

Nietzsche's work emerges in confrontation to the key tenets of Enlightenment thought that privileged reason over sensory perception and assumed the existence of a rational and fully-autonomous subject. He sought to overrule the claims made on behalf of reason with a radically unreasonable, irrational and unscientific mode of discourse.

Key to Nietzschean thought is the concept of nihilism encompasses many of the ideas first advanced by the Sophists. Nietzsche argues that the pillars of Enlightenment thought: reason, science, being and history are categories of value rather than truth.

He claims that none of these Enlightenment touchstones hold essence within themselves, but rather, have their inception in the foundation and dominance of certain privileged knowledge systems over others:

... the Sophists verge upon the first *critique of morality*, the first *insight* into morality:—they juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value judgments;—they let it be known that every morality can be dialectically justified; they divine that all attempts to give reasons for morality are necessarily *sophistical*—a proposition later proved on the grand scale by the ancient philosophers, from Plato onwards (down to Kant);—they postulate the first truth that a "morality-in-itself," a "good-in-itself" does not exist, that it is a swindle to talk of "truth" in this field.²²

Like the Sophists, Nietzsche argues that knowledge systems are upheld by the devices of language and rhetoric and are turned into what, by the machinery of metaphysics, becomes "truth". The role of nihilism is to expose this machinery. Throughout his work, Nietzsche seeks to let nihilism into the field of philosophy, constantly dissecting the truth claims of metaphysics and examining them for the ideologies that they are constructed to uphold. His dissolution of traditional metaphysical categories into acts of rhetoric reveals these categories as part of "... the science ... which deals with the fundamental errors of mankind – but as if they were fundamental truths."²³ In this way, nihilism shows that metaphysical truths simply express the subjective values of a given individual or social group and are not the immutable essence of either the divine or the human world.

Why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these "values" really had.—We require, sometime, *new values*.²⁴

Nihilism's ability to unmask truth as a device of rhetoric exposes "the will to power", or the internal urge within metaphysics to present itself and the concepts that it

privileges as unquestionable in order to attain ideological dominance. Nietzsche argues that "... the so-called drive for knowledge can be traced back to a drive to appropriate and conquer..."²⁵ and suggests that the construct of rationalism, whether encountered in science, philosophy or art, is the primary mechanism by which domination and power is attained within the Western tradition: "... no epistemological scepticism or dogmatism had ever arisen free from ulterior motives—it acquires a value of the second rank as soon as one has considered what it was that *compelled* the adoption of this point of view..."²⁶

Nihilism also challenges the separation of subject and object which is so strongly advanced in foundational thinking, particularly in the notion of the Cartesian *cogito* which is constructed, as Nietzsche writes, by the difference between thinking and not thinking:

There is thinking: therefore there is something "that thinks": this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as "true *a priori*" our belief in the concept of substance—that when there is thought there has to be something "that thinks" is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. In short, this is not merely the substantiation of a fact but a logical-metaphysical postulate—Along the lines followed by Descartes one does not come upon something absolutely certain but only upon the fact of a very strong belief.

If one reduces the proposition to "There is thinking, therefore there are thoughts," one has produced a mere tautology: and precisely that which is in question, the "reality of thought," is not touched upon—that is, in this form the "apparent reality" of thought cannot be denied. But what Descartes desired was that thought should have, not an *apparent* reality, but a reality *in itself*.²⁷

Nietzsche argues that the distinctions implied in the rhetorical separation of subject and object, cause and effect, are part of the function and operative nature of this will to power. Thus, the split between the rational and the irrational, truth and falsehood, essence and appearance, merely describes a mechanism of power. In this way Nietzsche dismantles the Hegelian dialectic and reveals it to be an example of just

such a split between subject and object or cause and effect used for the advancement of ideology.

Nietzsche also developed and refined the construct of the “eternal return” to replace Hegelian dialectics’ valorisation of progress as “overcoming”, with a process of continuous “becoming”. Deleuze sees the “eternal return” antagonistically opposed to the plodding nature of dialectics, where differences are always subsumed to an underlying unity, contradictions always seek a higher synthesis and movement ultimately results in stasis.²⁸ In Nietzschean terms, the eternal return posits progress as a process without beginning or end; a constant transforming of being into nothingness; a pluralising account of difference rather than synthesis:

This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself; as a whole, of unalterable size, a household without expenses or losses, but likewise without increase or income; enclosed by "nothingness" as by a boundary; not something blurry or wasted, not something endlessly extended, but set in a definite space as a definite force, and not a sphere that might be "empty" here or there, but rather as force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms; out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance, out of the play of contradictions back to the joy of concord, still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and its years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness....²⁹

There is a high degree of confluence between Nietzsche’s deconstruction of Enlightenment thought and historiography, and the rhetorical strategies employed by the aphoristic texts examined in this study. Apart from the obvious formal comparisons between these texts and Nietzsche’s aphoristic and fragmentary writing,

they also explicate many of Nietzsche's philosophical concerns. A number of these texts can be read as a reaction to the "will to power" of the dominant cultural and philosophical forces of their epoch, in that they deconstruct contemporaneous claims to historical progress. In addition, Nietzsche's use of nihilism as a remedial strategy is evident in the way that these texts disrupt and nullify contemporaneous forms and fictional strategies.

These aphoristic American texts emphasise the need for a suprahistorical perspective by favouring the discourse of, even yearning after, a pre-ontological sense of the primordial that might be apprehended in art or religion. Accordingly, they also privilege the writing of difference over synthesis. Nietzsche's vision of a radical materialism, elaborated in the notion of the eternal return, also finds its counterpart in these texts, alongside various dismantlings of the subject/object duality. Tony Tanner identifies many of these traits in the early work of Emerson, claiming that: "... the distinction of the new age would be the refusal of authority."³⁰ Certainly, the Nietzschean notion of nihilism is evident in both the formal strategies and the paradigmatic concerns of the writers that make up this genealogy.

The work of Martin Heidegger in the early and middle part of the twentieth focuses on the question of being after Nietzsche's dissolution of truth into value. Heidegger's idea of being is understood as the distinction between all of the subjects and objects in the world (being) and the unchanging "is-ness" present in whatever exists in the world (Being). Heidegger examines the way in which Western metaphysics has systematically repressed the question of Being by privileging the question of truth instead: "... the starting point is the problem of truth and the primacy of this investigation is upheld throughout the whole of this tradition of thought."³¹

He argues that traditional philosophy has always pursued the question of logical truth to give reasons for the relationships between things in the everyday world. And that metaphysics, in particular, is the philosophical system of thought which is primarily lead by the question of logical truth and the use of reason. This means that traditional philosophy is incapable of posing the question of Being, let alone of developing and answering it. As Ernesto Grassi explains, the search for truth that constitutes Western metaphysics results in the forgetting of the question of Being "... because the questions that man has raised are directed to beings and not to Being, that is, they are directed to nature, man, and all of those things that affect us directly and urge themselves upon us but which are not prior to Being itself."³² Furthermore, Heidegger contends that we can never speak about Being as if it were *something*; an object or an entity. And, as Grassi points out, "... every attempt to say what Being is forces us to define it as a being among other beings, which means that we necessarily fail to say what it is *as* Being."³³ Because Being resists reason, Heidegger argues that it has primacy over the central concern of metaphysics: the reasoning, logical and autonomous self.

The resistance of Being to reason underlines the link between Heideggerian and Nietzschean thought. If Being is the unstable and unreasonable entity that Heidegger proposes, then like truth, reason and God in Nietzschean philosophy, it too is dissolved from being a foundational element to being a construct of value or in Nietzschean terms, a "truth-claim". Vattimo contrasts the conception of Being in traditional metaphysics and Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought as the difference between "'becoming' which presupposes ... necessary and recognizable rhythms which nevertheless maintain a certain ideal stability ... and Being as an *event* ... which

occurs when [Being] historicizes itself and when we historicize ourselves.”³⁴ Both Nietzsche and Heidegger dispute the idea of history as teleological and argue for an understanding of the historicising, or narrative-driven nature by which history is constructed. And both see this process of historicisation as occurring within the service of some wider cause or “will to power.”

For Heidegger, modernity’s narrative of progress was constructed in the service of technology, which he perceived to be the final stage in the history of the self-concealment of Being. Michael Zimmerman’s examination of Heidegger’s social and political *milieu* in Heidegger’s Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art, provides a detailed account of the impact of the historical context on Heidegger’s personal and philosophical decisions during the earlier part of the century, suggesting that his antagonistic attitude towards Enlightenment or Hegelian versions of progress, particularly progress around technology, was due to the position held by Germany within the world at this time: “...Heidegger was shocked by the transformations wreaked by economic and industrial ‘progress.’ Moreover, he developed an attitude of contempt for all those who were blind enough to promote, or even to tolerate, such a soul-destroying progress.”³⁵ Indeed, Heidegger perceived technology as the machinery of modernity; the means by which the tools of science, industrialism and rationalism could overtake and capture Being, a point he makes in his analysis of the modes of existence available to *Dasein*, “the being-in-the-world” at the centre of Being and Time. He argues that it is technology which damages the individual subject and creates a kind of mass “anyone self”; a self undifferentiated from any other, a self-in-crisis:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own *Dasein* completely into the kind of being of “the other”, in such a way, indeed, that the others, as

distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real [*eigentliche*] dictatorship of the anyone self is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as the *anyone self* [*man*] takes pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as the *anyone self* see and judges; likewise, we shrink back from the great mass as the *anyone self* shrinks back; we find shocking what the *anyone self* finds shocking. The anyone self, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.³⁶

Heidegger's analysis of the technology of Being and his understanding of the experience of *Dasein*, is central to the development of anti-foundational thought in the mid-twentieth century. His complex and often contradictory approaches to the questions of history, reason, science, technology and the self, further break down the humanistic and emancipatory thrust of Enlightenment and modernist thought, revealing the mechanics of totality beneath. However, in The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation, David Michael Levin demonstrates that far from being an apocalyptic view of the future, the Heideggerian argument with traditional metaphysics is produced with the view to opening the question of Being so that we can somehow rediscover "humanism", which Levin defines as:

... radically decentred, radically unsettling. The ego the *ego cogito* of modern metaphysics, cannot let itself be open to the question of Being without being decentred, cast out, in a kind of exile, into the dimensionality of a wider, more open field. Nor can 'Man' remain standing as the sole measure and ground, in a sense which tolerates false pride, intolerance of indifference, neglect of the ecology of the earth, and totalitarianism. Heidegger's new version of 'humanism' is therefore in opposition to the tradition of 'humanism' and is in this sense, a kind of 'anti-humanism'.³⁷

Levin's notes that Heidegger's references to the pre-ontological bring with them connections to archaic modes of existence that defy the rational experiences of the self privileged by traditional metaphysics. He argues that while Heidegger is not searching for metaphysical origins in the traditional sense, Being and Time does make the case that:

... when we have made contact with experiences we are compelled, after appropriately critical reflection, to call 'primordial' or 'inaugurative', our retrieval of their relatedness to Being makes it possible for us to contribute to the deconstruction of traditional ontology with a much clearer sense of its failings, of how it has 'failed' us.³⁸

Levin's ultimate use of Heidegger's argument is to equate the opening of the question of Being with the notion of the body as a site for primordial or archaic experiences to be experienced, a point which will be discussed further here in reference to Kathy Acker's work. Levin writes: "It is only when we attempt to integrate this bodily felt sense of Being, this pre-ontological understanding, into our daily life that we can continue to question... the way we normally live – the way of life, and the understanding of it, which are characteristic of anyone-and-everyone."³⁹

Levin's celebratory analysis of Heideggerian thought and its contribution to the deconstruction of Western metaphysics is similarly articulated in Vattimo's The End of Modernity. Vattimo finishes his extensive exploration of the possibilities of nihilism in Nietzsche's and Heidegger's works with a strong endorsement of the revolutionary and transformative appeal of a world existing through the experience of "twilight", or the decline of metaphysical Being and rational thought. Vattimo argues that this "decline", rather than being a symptom of decadence as other writers suggest, is an opportunity for philosophical reconstruction. This reconstruction he suggests, should take the form of nihilism, which realises, as Vattimo writes, that "... 'humanity' can be fulfilled in history only through a profound revision and transformation of the very notion of humanism...."⁴⁰ And while such a transformation of humanism, philosophy and science cannot yet be imagined or properly understood, Vattimo concludes that philosophy's task after Heidegger must be to incorporate the various codes and traces of the metaphysical project into another secularised project, able to reach beyond the realm of metaphysics, where all forms of foundation, from

theology to dialectics, could be cast aside and “... whose consequences we have only just begun to comprehend.”⁴¹

The aphoristic texts of this study are primarily concerned with questions of Being. They are alert to the emergence and triumph of mass culture and the relationship between such a culture and technology itself. In each case a vision of society develops which is radically materialist and anti-humanist. This claim goes hand-in-hand with their interrogation of subjectivity, and their search for something primary to, or beyond it. These examinations of subjectivity, and their tentative substitutions: the East, the body, the deject, are the direct result of the exposure of the *cogito* to Being. As John Carlos Rowe has contended, American literary culture has always been the site of such contestations and experimentations of subject. And as modernity becomes postmodernity, they are played out uniquely against the forces of culture, capital and technology.

It is the interplay of these forces that also forms the focus of the Frankfurt School, established during 1923 as a Marxist-oriented research centre at the University of Frankfurt. The Frankfurt School sought to develop an interdisciplinary socio-political theory which could serve as an instrument of social transformation and was characterised by a synthesis of philosophy, social theory and research. Frankfurt School theorists did not use the ideas or tools of Marxism uncritically. In fact, they saw within Marxism a tendency towards dogma and a fetishising of the authority of empirical scientific methodology over and above other forms of analysis. Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s The Dialectic of Enlightenment, written during the early 1940s while the Frankfurt School was exiled in America, contains implicit critiques of Marxism, as well as of fascism and consumer capitalism. Departing from the Marxist

theory of history that assumes progress can occur within the dialectical process, they present a philosophy of history that traces the fate of the Enlightenment from the beginnings of scientific thought among the Greeks to fascist concentration camps and the culture industries of U.S. capitalism. They show how Western rationality serves as an instrument of domination and how "enlightenment" turns into its opposite: mystification and oppression. The book criticises the Enlightenment's cornerstones of science and reason, implicating Marxism within the "dialectic of Enlightenment."

In The Dialectic of Enlightenment Adorno and Horkheimer theorise the end of the individual and stress the importance of preserving a form of centred subjectivity in order to fulfill the emancipatory goals of socialism. The erosion of subjectivity, they argue, betrays the promise of modernity, which was itself founded upon the belief that science and technology would improve human control over nature and produce greater and more equal versions of freedom. They suggest that the institutions and practices of advanced industrial society, such as those located in the realms of popular culture, were only producing greater conformity and social domination. The interrogation of popular culture and its engagement with the literary text is both a formal and a paradigmatic concern of the later texts within this genealogy. In examining the way in which aphoristic texts digest and represent the popular, this study tests the claims of the Frankfurt School against more emancipatory visions of this phenomenon.

V

While Adorno, in particular, theorises the culture industry and the subject produced under its dominance, in general, the Frankfurt School does not specifically consider the full array of mechanisms by which this industry is driven. Although they focus heavily on an analysis of capital and its tools, their work does not take in account the

more implicit role of language in the production of the subject. Language, however, and the ways in which it represents, mediates and produces subjectivity is a central consideration for later anti-foundational thought, specifically French poststructural theory, which is, in a sense, a convergence between Nietzschean and Heideggerian thought, linguistic understandings of the construction of language stemming from the work of Saussure,⁴² and psychoanalytic notions of the construction of the self that emerged from the work of Freud and Lacan.⁴³ Derrida's work is a primary example of such theory, constantly struggling to demonstrate the way in which structures, systems or foundations which appear to be closed and complete, are inevitably ruptured because they cannot incorporate what they nevertheless presuppose. Whether in the guise of madness or accident, or what might be called "otherness", there is always the trace of the unassimilable remainder, which is the condition that makes systems and structures possible, while also underlining the impossibility of their integrity and stability.

In "Aphorism Countertime" Derrida specifically maps the destabilising processes of signification onto the means by which concepts of foundational thought and anti-foundational thought play themselves out in literary texts. He refers to the rhetorical effect of this process as "aphorism" and the conditions that this construct allows into the field of the text as "*contretemps*". In this attention to the marginal and seemingly enclosed mode of aphorism, and the conditions which allow them to be, Derrida's speculations on Romeo and Juliet become a guide for this study's conception of the aphoristic literary work.

The place held by "Aphorism Countertime" within the huge scope of Derrida's work bears upon the process of examination here also. Within this small text are the

crystallised particles of monstrous debates about being and knowledge that have governed and shaped Western intellectual history. These particles proliferate as literary fragments within the American literary canon and within wider American modalities. It is America's inception and progression within the order of rhetoric that makes the strands of this debate converge upon its body of thought and writing so intensely, and so in "Aphorism Countertime", there is an appropriate model for the consideration of the American "counter-tradition" which, as this thesis argues, is constructed and maintained within the order of the aphorism.

¹ Foucault, M. The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. Sheridan Smith, A. (trans). NY: Pantheon, 1972, p14

² Ibid

³ Foucault, M, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", quoted in Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p109

³ Acker, K. Don Quixote, London: Paladin, 1986, p117

⁴ Vattimo G. The End of Modernity. Snyder, J.R. (trans). London: Polity Press, 1988, p40

⁵ Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp12-14

⁶ Barthes, quoted in Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p11

⁷ Ibid, p13

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Rowe, J. C. Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness. NY: Cornell University Press, 1976, p17

¹⁰ Ibid, p21

¹¹ Ibid

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- ¹² Ibid, pp18-19
- ¹³ Marx, Leo. The Machine in the Garden. NY: Oxford University Press 1964, p16
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p19
- ¹⁵ Laclau, E and Mouffe, C. Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics. Moore, W. and Cammack, P (trans). London: Verso, 1985, p95
- ¹⁶ Hegel, G. Lectures on the Philosophy of History. Haldane E.S. (trans). NY: Humanities Press, 1968, p156
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p178
- ¹⁸ Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p103
- ¹⁹ Lucács, G. Realism in Out Time: Literature and the Class Struggle. NY: Harper and Row, 1962
- ²⁰ Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p108
- ²¹ Foucault, M. The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language. Sheridan Smith, A. (trans). NY: Pantheon, 1972, p14
- ²² Nietzsche, F. The Will to Power. Kaufmann, W. and Hollingdale, R.J. (trans) NY: Vintage, 1968, p7
- ²³ Nietzsche, F. Human All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits. Hollingdale, R.J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p22.
- ²⁴ Nietzsche, F. The Will to Power. Kaufmann, W. and Hollingdale, R.J. (trans) NY: Vintage, 1968, p176
- ²⁵ Ibid
- ²⁶ Ibid
- ²⁷ Ibid, pp176-177
- ²⁸ Deleuze, G. Nietzsche and Philosophy. NY: Columbia University Press, 1983, p157
- ²⁹ Nietzsche, F. The Will to Power. Kaufmann, W. and Hollingdale, R.J. (trans) NY: Vintage, 1968, pp178-179
- ³⁰ Tanner, T. The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p14
- ³¹ Heidegger, M. Being and Time. Stambaugh, J (trans.) New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p26
- ³² Grassi, E. Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism: Four Studies. Binghamton: MRTS, 1983, p34.
- ³³ Ibid, p33
- ³⁴ Vattimo G. The End of Modernity. Snyder, J.R. (trans). London: Polity Press, 1988, p4
- ³⁵ Zimmerman, M. Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, p18
- ³⁶ Heidegger, M. Being and Time. Stambaugh, J (trans.) New York: Harper and Row, 1972, pp126-127
- ³⁷ Levin, D.M.. The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation. New York: Routledge, 1988, p24
- ³⁸ Ibid, p37
- ³⁹ Ibid, p42
- ⁴⁰ Vattimo G. The End of Modernity. Snyder, J.R. (trans). London: Polity Press, 1988, pp179-180
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p180
- ⁴² See Saussure, F. de. Course in General Linguistics. NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966
- ⁴³ See, for example, Lacan's discussion of Freud in Lacan, J. "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud" in Écrits: A Selection. Sheridan, A (trans.). NY: Norton, 1977, p172

Moby-Dick: The Limen of American Aphorism

I

In “Aphorism Countertime”, Derrida argues that Romeo and Juliet is a play that arrives accompanied by “...all the *Romeo and Juliets* that came before it...”.¹ Consequently, he says, “...despite appearances an aphorism never arrives by itself, it doesn’t come alone...”.² The same claim might also be made about the texts considered here. Not only are these works disjunctive and disconcerting in their structural and paradigmatic assembly, but the historical and cultural context of their production is also often fraught. And so the interface between the text and the “world” that supports it is a concern that recurs throughout this examination. However, the nature of this interface and the exchanges that pass through it are not easily characterised and cannot be reduced to instances of allegory. Russell Reising makes a similar argument in his study of the American critical tradition, The Unusable Past: Theory and Study of American Literature, where he warns against the tendency of critics to impose a simplistic allegorical analysis on the American canon.³ That same warning is posted here: the texts under discussion are more than mere allegories of a turbulent though parallel ontology, they are themselves the very sites of historical and cultural crises, beating out, and out of, time.

Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick is a work deeply enmeshed within the various critical and material worlds of American culture and the formation of the American canon. This chapter considers the means by which Moby-Dick has been put to work as a touchstone for America itself, as allegory, and the ways in which it resists and exceeds such deployment. Its continuing capacity to elude critical or historical containment positions it at the beginning of the anti-foundational cultural strain followed throughout this thesis.

Moby-Dick is a liminal text. It is an archway through which modernity enters American thought and writing. Melville's fragmentary writing and its relationship to, and subversion of, the historical and literary context from which it emerges, provides a stage upon which the drama of modernity's intrusion into American culture is performed. In drawing attention to the process by which rhetorical constructions of America are naturalised and domesticated into truth, Moby-Dick disrupts the mechanisms of representation. It does this by alerting us to the very opposite processes at work within its own enclosure: by foregrounding its status as writing. In Moby-Dick, representational strategies proliferate and are ultimately exposed, and Melville's speculative process ultimately points towards the failure of writing to stand as truth.

This failure of truth in representation is also the failure of the central Western truth of the self-present individual, the Cartesian *cogito*. Melville examines the status of this figure in the text, again through speculative and experimental means. The central protagonists of the work, and even the minor members of the *Pequod*'s crew, are studies in the range of subject positions available within various discourses of the self. Ahab and Ishmael are clearly agents of key Western processes of being, while other characters such as Pip or Queequeg, stand in for alternative strains of identity.

In its investigation of both representation and subjectivity, Moby-Dick is an aphoristic text. Its refusal to adhere to mimetic representational methods and its exposure of the untenable condition of the Western subject confound the key modes by which Western, specifically American, myths of progress and identity are forged. The form, structure and paradigmatic concerns of the text break these myths down into fragmentary remains.

And these remains articulate the conditions of *contretemps* where, as Derrida says, the centre is and is not a centre but is always dispersed out into magnetic, imagistic constellations of: "...names, hours, maps of places, dates and supposedly "objective place-names..." which themselves proliferate into "...infinite distance...the multiplicity of worlds..."⁴

II

In its opening, *Moby-Dick* signals its entanglement within extra-textual threads by presenting a variety of definitions and descriptions of whales, apparently provided to the author by "...a late consumptive usher to a grammar school..." and a "sub-sub librarian..."⁵. These quotations, divided into the categories "Etymology" and "Extracts", and the subsequent characterisations of their suppliers as "...threadbare in coat, heart, body and brain..." and ... " ...a mere painstaking burrower and grubworm of a poor devil..."⁶, immediately establish the novel as discordant with usual nineteenth century literary conventions.

These early "Etymology" and "Extract" sections, on the surface, do little to expand our understanding of what will appear later in the work. Rather, they seem to delay our entry into the text with vague, unreliable and piecemeal information about whales and whaling that holds back any narrative action. Closer attention to the scanty fragments of information held here, however, reveals something of the metatextual system that Melville employs in the main text. Just as the "...pale usher" of the "Etymology" section is concerned with "...dusty old lexicons and grammars..."⁷, so too does the work sift through the remnants of various representational modes, seeking to unearth or dust off some of these anachronous forms for reuse. Similarly, the fragmentary quotes about

whales in Western thought posted in the “Extracts” section signal that it is just such textual remnants that will necessarily stand in for truth in the writing to come. As readers, we find ourselves like the “sub-sub librarian” who collects up the quotes and shuffles them together “higgledy-piggledy”⁸ to try and make something of them. It is our reading that must make sense of the seemingly disconnected material offered here and later in the work itself, and it might be, warns Melville, that like the poor “painstaking burrower ... of a poor devil ...”, we would be better advised to give it up.⁹ By initiating the text within a field of other texts which range from quotations from the Bible to sections from Cook’s journals to scraps of Shakespeare, Melville draws attention to how language and representational strategies feed upon one other to build narrative worlds. He reminds us that any knowledge of whales is only constructed from what is already written into the fabric of our cultural inheritance, and while the scope of this knowledge is diverse and complex, none of it brings us any closer to an understanding of the “actual” whale itself. Similarly, Moby-Dick’s position within the “world” from which it is being read is also constructed within discourse and, like the “Etymology” and “Extracts” sections of the novel, our attention to this extra-textual world provides unexpected angles on the work itself.

Moby-Dick is constructed from fragments, and it also comes to us through the disparate fragments of its own critical tradition. When we read the novel, we read through the frames of those other readings that precede ours. These readings leave their own marks on the text. Many reviewers at the time of Moby-Dick’s publication in 1851 confirm the novel to be at odds with the norm. One critic describes it as “... an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact ...” and “... the worst school of Bedlam

literature ...”¹⁰, while another is appalled by its medley of genres, its violations of literary conventions and its reckless disregard of veracity in either character or plot.¹¹ The combination of shock and bemusement found within the elaborately worded contemporary criticism, the expressions of incredulity and, in some cases, boredom, reveal the extent to which it transgresses the boundaries of mid-nineteenth century literature, both paradigmatically and in terms of its form.

While Moby-Dick was received by contemporaneous critics with bemusement and boredom, like many of the other writers from that antebellum period, Melville’s work, and in particular, Moby-Dick, has gone on to become a central part of the American canon. Arguably, it is the very centre of this tradition. This in no small part due to the work of F.O. Matthiessen, who in his canon-forging American Renaissance compares it to Paradise Lost or Faust, and although he finds that it does not quite meet the achievements set by these works, nonetheless, he does argue that the novel “fulfill[s] what Coleridge held to be the major function of the artist: he brought ‘the whole soul of man into activity’”¹² He says that Melville:

... wrote the enduring signature of his age. He gave full expression to its abundance, to its energetic desire to master history by repossessing all the resources of the hidden past in a timeless and heroic present. But he did not avoid the darkness of that past, the perpetual suffering in the heart of man, the broken arc of his career which inevitably ends in death.¹³

Since the early part of the twentieth century Melville’s work has become increasingly caught in a web of critical scholarship that “accompanies” its reading, much as Derrida says of Romeo and Juliet in “Aphorism Countertime”.¹⁴ Like Shakespeare’s, Melville’s writing exists enmeshed in layers of analysis and interpretation that have also become

part of the wider experience of engagement with his work. The effect of this, as William Spanos argues in The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies, has been to create from Moby-Dick a monument of and to American literature; monumental in the sense that it is essentially a cold and distant “Apollonian” construct, voided of life; domesticated and pacified:

In identifying Melville’s witness with the luminous global witness attributed by the modern humanist tradition at large to the authors of *Job*, *Dr. Faustus* and *Lear* – in universalizing its American context – this criticism also colonizes and pacifies its historically specific insurrectionary sociopolitical force. In other words, to arrive at a state of “deliverance” ... these critics have had in their “reading” to overlook and suppress the minute and ... not-so-minute particulars precipitated in and by the temporal process of Melville’s text.¹⁵

Spanos’ assessment of Melvillian criticism argues that few scholars, old or new, have escaped the snare of eliding Moby-Dick with “America” as a mythologised and reified object. He concludes that Modernist and postmodernist readings are indeed “... different faces of the same problematic: affiliative oppositional perspectives within – variants of – an identical class.”¹⁶ Against such scholarship, Spanos offers his own “errant reading” of Moby-Dick, arguing that:

Moby-Dick is a destructive social text - ...after Nietzsche and Foucault... or after Mikhail Bakhtin, a “carnavalesque” novel – that finally exists to de-structure the “competent reader’s” achivally inscribed – and thus always confident – impulse to read and “master” texts spatially not simply to expose its gaze’s “imperial” project of decipherment, but to release the temporality – and the sociopolitical forces – it has colonized.¹⁷

Spanos seeks to read Moby-Dick from beyond the constraints of the Western humanist tradition and positions his own argument outside the metaphysics of presence. He describes the text as an uncannily “intuitive” and “parodic” precursor to Heideggerian and Derridean philosophy, foretelling the end of humanism and history itself:

... Melville had an intuition, not simply of the disabling internalization and resolution of existential contradictions incumbent on the reduction of being-in-the-world [Heidegger's Dasein] to miniaturized representation. He also had an intuition of the imperial will to power over being – and ... of the cultural, economic and sociopolitical implications of this will to power – informing the miniaturizing tragic vision and the archival critical discourse it has produced. It is this intuition ... that disaffiliates [Melville] from the exhausted and exhausting metaphysical tradition at large ... and affiliates him ... with the postmodern, or more specifically posthumanist [mode] ...¹⁸

Spanos' argument is compelling in its characterisation of Melville's writing as intuitively postmodern and in its reading of the metahistory of the critical project that surrounds it.

Nonetheless, to envisage Melville's purpose as "parodic" is to overlook key textual elements suggesting something quite unlike parody is at work. If parody is understood to include a distinct authorial intention to ridicule by extreme mimicry the object of its derision, then Melville's work cannot easily fit this definition. For when parody is wielded as a literary tool of attack, it is generally assumed that the parodist has the full measure of the form being parodied. For parody to be effective, the writer must be able to first identify and then overblow the forms being employed. Linda Hutcheon defines parody as:

...the realisation of the literary inadequacies of a certain convention. Not merely an unmasking of a non-functioning system, it is also a necessary and creative process by which new forms appear to revitalise the tradition and open up new possibilities to the artist. Parodic art both is a deviation from the norm and includes that norm within itself as backgrounded material.¹⁹

Under this definition, parody's function is to unveil the trite use of literary conventions and clichés which are otherwise taken for granted through over-familiarisation.

Hutcheon's analysis shows that not only do parodic texts criticise literary traditions, but they also produce a new synthesis of literary conventions in their rewriting of canonical texts.

In Moby-Dick Melville is certainly writing in an experimental mode and does produce new forms and conventions. However, this experimentation with form is not simply the result of parodic intertextuality. Moby-Dick is constructed through more speculative and contingent processes than those suggested by Spanos. It is aphoristic rather than parodic. Whereas parody retroactively imposes an authorial presence and intention on the works, aphorism, by contrast, reveals the speculative and accidental means by which Melville's writing comes to decentre traditional narratological forms and paradigms. Melville's writing presents the state of being out of time, in *contretemps*, but it is never *against* its time. Unlike parodic writing, Moby-Dick is not really derisive or ridiculing in its effect. Rather than specifically setting out to undercut humanist thought through the use of a "...parodic modality ...", as Spanos argues, Melville's writing is more tentative, trying out a range of philosophical positions and literary modes that are speculative not ironic. While the effect of this is deconstructive, the means by which Melville achieves this lacks the commanding consciousness of being required from the parodist.

III

*"Aphorism is the name."*²⁰

Both Moby-Dick and "Aphorism Countertime" open by drawing our attention to the process of naming. Derrida's equation between aphorism and the "name" positions the precarious centrality of the rational subject called forth in the process of naming with the signifier, with the fragmentary mode of aphorism. Melville's "Call me Ishmael"²¹, itself an aphorism, also elicits a naming process that superimposes the name onto the representational field of the text. The opening sentence in Moby-Dick has generated a

swathe of critical commentary, revivalist to revisionist. Spanos historicises the naming of Ishmael, noting that it has been read in a number of ways including the evocation of the biblical figure of Ishmael the exile in Genesis 16:12, as well as through the equation of Ishmael with Melville himself.²² New Americanist critics have more recently pointed out the critical shift from Melvillian scholarship in the twenties, which focused its sympathies and interests on the figure of Ahab, to Melvillian scholarship in the fifties, which shifted its gaze to Ishmael. Discussing this shift within the work of the New Critics, Donald Pease argues that they reproduce the conditions of the Cold War into their readings of Moby-Dick. Ahab assumes the characteristics of a totalitarian nation state in his monomaniacal pursuit of the White Whale, while Ishmael becomes the representation of the American liberal imagination.²³ In this sense, the foregrounded name in the first sentence of the novel points to the morally “sanctioned” position of Ishmael as representative of the “free”, non-communist, America:

And they [the New Critics] set Ishmael’s subversive energies against the totalitarian will at work in Ahab’s policy ... [The] canonical reading appropriated *Moby-Dick* to a modern scene of cultural persuasion analogous to the one at work in Melville’s age. This modern scene of persuasion is the global scenario popularly designated as the Cold War.²⁴

In The Errant Art of Moby-Dick, Spanos is compelled by the Cold War framework through which the New Americanists read Moby-Dick. He too draws attention to the invocation of the name in the novel’s first sentence, but goes further than Pease by then structuring his interpretation within a Heideggerian frame. The imperative “Call me Ishmael”, in Spanos’ analysis, becomes the means by which Ishmael and America are intertwined, as well as the signal that the story to be told will emerge from the “inside”;

from the point of view of the Heideggerian *Dasein*, the being-in-the-world whose position encompasses the future-anterior logical economy.

Melville's initial grammar of naming is an instance of aphorism; a fragmentary and marginal calling forth of epistemology to the surface of the text. "Call me Ishmael" exposes the construction of being through representation as a central concern within Moby-Dick. Like the dynamic of chance at work in Derrida's "Aphorism Countertime", the foregrounding of naming signals the wider instability of names over their referents, and suggests that the authority of narration is itself merely accidental; always hovering over "...a closing vortex...", as Ishmael does at the end of Moby-Dick.²⁵ Derek Attridge makes this point in his introduction to the essay in Acts of Literature:

Derrida examines the contrary force of naming (in both literal and more general senses) as a cultural practice: in instituting and enforcing temporal and spatial homogeneity, it brings into being the possibility of the very accidents – including death as we understand it – which it is designed to prevent.²⁶

"Call me Ishmael" signals, not the presence of Melville's anachronistically deconstructive intuition, but rather the aphoristic nature of the process by which names come into being. In naming Ishmael, Melville sets in motion an assemblage of writing and reading practices that are both speculative, dangerous and contingent. These writing and reading practices "...bring into being the possibility of accidents..."²⁷ and send the reader into the eddies of *contretemps*. The name and the instruction to name, "Call me Ishmael" functions as a kind of death trap. As Derrida explains, the name can survive death and so has power over death in a way that no narrator does: "...aphorism lives on, it lives on much longer than its present and it lives longer than life."²⁸ So Ishmael, the name, becomes the narrator of a fateful, deathward moving tale, and his instruction to

“Call me Ishmael” is not a casual suggestion, but a demand that places the reader into a wider aphoristic narrative; a series of proliferating, deathward moving aphorisms.

The aphorism or discourse of association; each sentence, each paragraph dedicates itself to separation, it shuts itself up, whether one likes it or not in the solitude of its proper duration. Its encounter and its contact with the other are always given over to chance, to whatever may befall, good or ill. Nothing is absolutely assured, neither the linking nor the order. One aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before and after the other, each can survive the other – and in the other series.²⁹

Moby-Dick's Table of Contents page immediately highlights the processes of aphorism in the structures and modalities of the text itself. Like Derrida's statement that “... an aphorism never arrives by itself, it doesn't come alone. It is part of a serial logic”³⁰, the novel's one hundred and thirty five chapters, as well as “Etymology”, “Extracts” and “Epilogue” sections, foreground the disjunctive nature of the novel's construction; its existence as a text speaking the conditions of *contretemps*. Indeed, the form and structure of Moby-Dick are in some ways the most obvious markers of its dislocated and dislocating nature. The chapters, like the sections of “Etymology” and “Extracts”, are often short or incomplete, strangely titled and include an odd rendering of fact and fiction which interrupt one another throughout the course of the work. They are discordant and lack those Aristotelian necessities of structure: beginning, middle and end.

In Pierre or the Ambiguities the narrator describes the process of writing in a way which points to the method found at work within Moby-Dick:

While the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last... yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life, these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings, but in imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as

mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate.”³¹

So too the chapters that proliferate to form Moby-Dick are like “mutilated stumps” inasmuch as they refuse to “... unravel their own intricacies” and “have no proper endings”. Critics have long been at odds over the structural methods employed by Melville in the novel. Some choose to ignore it in favour of an examination of themes, while others find it wanting in its “carelessness” and lack of craft:

The question we have here to ask then is how did Melville go about controlling ... *Moby-Dick*? The general, strictly true ... answer would be: haphazardly - that is, through an attitude which varied from arrogance of extreme carelessness to the humility of complete inattention. It is not that he attended only to what seriously interested him, for he was as careless of what he thought important as of what he thought trivial, but that apparently he has no sure rule as to what required management and what would take care of itself. His rule was vagary, where consequential necessities did not determine otherwise. And even there, Melville’s eye was not good.³²

“Melville’s eye”, in this analysis, lacks the length or quality of vision to order thought into a seamless symbolic form by which the “haphazard” or “vagary” of writing might be hidden. Moby-Dick exposes the process of writing as much as it presents a story to be told, and in so doing, cuts the anchors on distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and fable. The chapters that spin out do not all add up to a central narrative thread, and the story of the *Pequod* and her crew is really only part of the tale. Melville writes by interweaving the plot with fragments of other matter: information about whales and whaling vessels, stories of whales and whalers, references to important whaling texts (Jonah’s story and the like), thoughts about whales in art, commerce and culture; all designed, as Ishmael says in “The Affidavit” to “... take away any incredulity which a profound ignorance of the entire subject may induce in some minds, as to the natural verity of the main points of this affair.”³³ He goes on to add that the outcome of this

narrative method will be “unmethodical” “...but shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations by me as a whaleman; and from these citation, I take it – the conclusion aimed at will naturally follow of itself.”³⁴ In fact, the effect is quite the opposite. The piled up discussions on whaling do not lead to any “natural” conclusions about the reliability of the narrator or the narrative. As Melville writes in Billy Budd, Sailor “Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges.”³⁵ So too the narrative method of Moby-Dick does not reveal the “truth” to be told or plot a history or even testify to the possibilities of achieving these things. Rather, it destroys, chapter by chapter, any lingering belief that such an apex of narrative in which all of the elements combine to produce a “natural veracity”: fact or fiction, may ever be reached.

The problems implicit within producing truthful narratives from the methods of fiction, history, natural sciences or artist endeavour underlie the structure of Moby-Dick. In “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales”, Melville makes this clear, concluding that “...the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last”.³⁶ This comment might well be applied to any attempt to capture the essence of anything through representative means. But there is more to Moby-Dick, it seems, than just the urge to write a factual discussion of the whaling *milieu* and so it is experimentation and the foregrounding of the writing process that Melville pursues here. It is not just through “haphazard[ness]” or “vagary” that the story of Ishmael and Ahab and the crew is constantly interrupted with tangential information. The chapters and sections of the text which resist the framing narrative of the *Pequod*’s story operate as syncopation in the way that Derek Attridge describes in his introduction to “Aphorism Countertime”: “...*contretemps*, a word which in French can mean both “mishap” and

“syncopation, “ while the phrase *à contretemps* suggests both “inopportunistly” and, in a musical sense, “out of time”.³⁷ In this sense, the peripheral and marginal information; the scientific, ethnographic or artistic discourses that have so often been overlooked or ignored in the critical responses to the novel, produce the effect of syncopation. They beat out against the main rhythm of the novel’s narrative, sometimes falling back into time and producing moments of harmony, but mostly off-beat and exposing of the mishaps of the narrative process and the will to representation.

Syncopation occurs in the structure and form of Moby-Dick, and so too does a sense of discordance. The narrative reporting the hunt for the White Whale and the fate of the crew who hunt it is often interrupted at the most crucial moments of action and the reader is asked to step back from the plot’s events to ponder something more metaphysical than simply what is going to happen next. This sense of discordance effectively alienates the reader from the Aristotelian trajectory towards *carthasis*, that moment of “recognition” for the hero and the audience which, “... combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents.”³⁸ The luxury of “pity and fear” then, is often denied or displaced in Moby-Dick by the use of discordant textual interruptions clanging against the narrative key. Just as action and intrigue are developed in the main plot-line, so the reader is diverted to a tangential commentary on another subject entirely. Consider the chapter entitled “Midnight, Forecastle” as an example of Melville’s discordant structure.³⁹

For several chapters before “Midnight, Forecastle”, the pace and intensity of the action has been greatly heightened by Ahab’s monologue that begins in “The Quarter-Deck”.⁴⁰

The language employed by the captain to describe his quest is heroic and echoes that of the Puritan Jeremiad, as has been noted many times in critical analyses of the novel.⁴¹

Like a roving preacher who has left his pulpit to save souls for the Lord, Ahab takes to the quarter deck and exhorts his crew to join him in his quest for vengeance against

“...that accursed white whale....”⁴².

“Hark ye again, - the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are as pasteboard masks. But in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me.”⁴³

“Midnight Forecastle”, by contrast, clashes against this narrative conceit in its comic portrayal of the crew as they gossip amongst themselves and pay little attention to the thrust of Ahab’s speech. Using the structures of farce, this chapter rubs against its wider narrative of tragic action and nudges the narrative out of the dominant rhythm of the novel’s main action. Interrupting tragic action with comic farce is not in itself a new strategy of writing. This conceit is used widely in Shakespearian drama, for example. Melville’s employment of the disjuncture between tragedy and comedy, however, is to destabilise and expose both forms. This is highlighted as the text swings back to wider metaphysical concerns in “The Whiteness of the Whale”.⁴⁴ Here the question of representation is considered and shown to exceed all narratological organising categories. Ishmael’s opening: “What the White Whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at time, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid”⁴⁵, signifies the failure of representational strategies over what Melville calls “nature”, but what we might think of in Lacanian terms as the Real. This hovering thing, figured as Moby-Dick, the White Whale, is the nameless and

terrifying excess of language; the wreckage of the will to truth. Ahab's fury, his cry to seek "...the little lower layer..."⁴⁶ is an impotent scream into the abyss between the representation and the real.

The discordance produced from the asynchronous placement of these three chapters, "The Quarter-Deck", "Midnight Forecastle" and "The Whiteness of the Whale", draws attention again to the work's aphoristic nature. Derrida argues that "*Contretemps* is produced at the intersection between interior experience ("the phenomenology of internal time consciousness" [after Husserl] or space consciousness) and its chronological or topographical marks, those which are said to be "objective" or "in the world."⁴⁷ So too the seams of construction between the chapters, paragraphs and sentences that constitute Moby-Dick, foreground the dissonant intersection between "interior experience" and "chronology" in a way that interrupts the process of representation throughout. The frayed edges of narrative suggest the dull tools of representation and their inability to capture truth or nature. This creates a marginalised narrative which refuses the construction of a hermeneutical fictional world. Derrida argues similarly in Of Grammatology, concluding that:

Writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true. If every sign refers to a sign, and if "sign of a sign" signifies writing, certain conclusions — which I shall consider at the appropriate moment will become inevitable. What Saussure saw without seeing, knew without being able to take into account, following in that the entire metaphysical tradition, is that a certain model of writing was necessarily but provisionally imposed (but for the inaccuracy in principle, insufficiency of fact, and the permanent usurpation) as instrument and technique of representation of a system of language. And that this movement, unique in style, was so profound that it permitted the thinking, within language, of concepts like those of the sign, technique, representation, language.⁴⁸

Such a view of language, in which meaning is deferred along a line of “signs of signs of signs”, and where writing is how this deferral process is invoked, exposes representation as a guise. Similarly, the syncopation and discordance that rattle Moby-Dick oppose traditional Western structural paradigms and establish the text as an expression of *contretemps*. These structural paradigms, crystallised by Aristotle’s definition of narrative structure as, “a whole which has a beginning, a middle, and an end”⁴⁹ are significantly challenged in the construction of Moby-Dick, which denies these requirements throughout. Indeed, the text specifically makes comment on this point in the chapter entitled “The Life-Buoy”, which reports the reaction of the *Pequod*’s carpenter - already described as a “half-horrible stolid man” whose position includes maintaining the functioning of Ahab’s wooden leg⁵⁰ - when Starbuck commands that he make a lifeboat from Queequeg’s coffin-bed:

I don’t like this cobbling sort of business – I don’t like it at all; it’s undignified; its not my place. Let tinkers’ brats do tinkering; we are their betters. I like to take in hand none but the clean, virgin, fair-and-square mathematical jobs, something that regularly begins at the beginning, and is at the middle when midway, and comes to an end at the conclusion; not a cobbler’s job, that’s at an end in the middle, and at the beginning at the end.⁵¹

Like a “tinker’s” or a “cobbler’s” job, then, Moby-Dick begins “... at the beginning at the end”⁵² and ends somewhere in the middle. The backward-glancing reticence of “Call me Ishmael”⁵³ does not conclude in resolution but rather casts resolution upon the mercy of the “... great shroud of sea [that] rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.”⁵⁴ The story’s frame undermines fictional hermeneutics and denies the authority of what Spanos calls the “representational circle” of narrative.⁵⁵ Moby-Dick is structured by a refusal of structure, then; loose ends which will not be tied. It is only in the epilogue, specifically

outside the circle of narrative, that Ishmael's fate is uncovered. He is collected out of the sea like one of its missing children by the *Rachel* and sent back to land in order to repeat the events as fiction, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* (1798), in an endlessly circulating repetition of narrative. And, like the wedding guest in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the reader enters the text only to find themselves having to enact the repetition or in Nietzsche's terms, the "eternal recurrence", of the *Pequod's* journey "... that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness ...".⁵⁶

This eternally recurring open circle of narrative is all the more significant for the emptiness that lies within it. For at the centre of *Moby-Dick* we find, not a revelation, not a peripatetic insight, but rather "The Whiteness of the Whale", Ishmael's despairing discussion of the absence at the centre of being.

...yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic into the soul than that redness that affrights in blood."⁵⁷

Whiteness, then, becomes an ontological and aphoristic trope in the text, where Ishmael, the decentred narrator of the decentred text, meditates the "...nameless terror..." by which he is defined, the "vortex" by which he is eventually consumed. The horror of whiteness, of "namelessness", of "dumbness"⁵⁸, then, is the horror, underlined here by the text's narrative structure, of the absence at the centre of being and in a Nietzschean sense, the eternal repetition of that absence. It also points to another absence, one that foreshadows Ishmael's meditations in "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales". This is the absence that lies at the centre of the Symbolic universe, the impossibility of capturing Nature/The signified/Whiteness with words or images; the failure, in other words, of full

presence. Here, at the centreless centre of Moby-Dick, we are returned, once again, to the novel's opening sentence and to its focus on the unstable status of names and naming; to the absence at the centre of the narrative's hermeneutical core; to its flawed symbolic form.

IV

Moby-Dick casts the reader into an eternally recurring world of ontological instability. Ishmael reports a disjointed tale of Ahab's mad quest for Something, the White Whale; yet simultaneously undermines that quest with meditations on Nothingness or Absence throughout. The novel charts a course away from foundational Cartesian philosophy where fixed notions of truth, reason, history and identity are possible, towards an unstable epistemology where those central tenets of Western thought are placed in opposition to other modes of thinking. The fragmentary and disjointed structure of the novel is one of the most significant markers of its aphoristic nature. Alongside structure, however, a number of other textual elements can be considered which also demonstrate this modality.

Throughout "Aphorism Countertime", Derrida underlines the precarious hold of time over space. He argues that the mechanics of time: "Dates, timetables, property registers, place-names..."⁵⁹ are empty codes attempting to disguise the "...essential impossibility of any absolute synchronization..."⁶⁰ and in this way are "...*contretemps*-traps...[they] produce misunderstanding, they accumulate the opportunities for false steps or wrong moves..."⁶¹ The unstable nature of time and space is also one of the key elements of Moby-Dick, a point which is illustrated in its seafaring context. The text's "setting sail"

establishes the aphoristic quality of its dominant paradigms and reveals the process of their production as a form of mapping.

The sea has been the source of a rich tradition of critical readings of Moby-Dick, from the first revivalists of the twenties up until the present day. The key themes of analysis in this regard include that of Matthiessen and the later New Critics who focused firmly on the sea's allegorical and symbolic role in the novel. Matthiessen discusses this point at length in American Renaissance to conclude that "...the sea conveys primarily gigantic restless power and obscurity. It is thus placed in opposition to 'the blessed light of the evangelical land' ...".⁶² While R.W.B. Lewis, reading through the Adamic frame established in The American Adam, notes that "...going to sea, both in deed and action..."⁶³ in Melville's writing was his way of addressing "...what Thoreau called "the essential facts of life"; and what must be stressed is that the venture was so much more harrowing for Melville because malice and evil were central among the facts to be fronted."⁶⁴ New Americanist scholar Donald Pease describes the sea as a no-man's land between the "Free World" and the Communist bloc⁶⁵, while William Spanos adds to this argument in The Errant Art of Moby-Dick, describing the sea as the site of "counterknowledge" "...to bring into explicitness the disruptive details [of the text] ...".⁶⁶ While most writers who have commented on significance of the setting in Moby-Dick generally agree that it functions as a space that is ontologically distanced from the expectations and habits of the land; the "...tide-beating heart of the earth..."⁶⁷, none seem to pinpoint the unique rhetorical process at work, apart from as allegory or symbol, that the sea registers in the text. No one seems to notice that the sea is precisely the site where the mechanics of time and space, "*contretemps*-traps", as Derrida describes them, are held

at bay long enough for the text to make a series of aphoristic mappings of its present, and perhaps its future context.

The importance of the sea as rhetorical “ground” in *Moby-Dick* is introduced in the first chapter of the novel as Ishmael marvels at its attraction to sailors and landsmen alike. Entitled “Loomings”, this chapter sketches out in an aphoristic sense, some brief and slightly unfocused musings on the differences in ontology between land and sea. However, even within this light-hearted banter we find suggestions of the sea’s importance to the wider purposes of the novel, when Ishmael says “... as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.”⁶⁸ This insight is given more gravity once the *Pequod* sets sail and Ishmael discovers the presence of the inscrutable Bulkington on the ship. Bulkington returns to sea immediately following a four year dangerous voyage, as if “... the land seemed scorching to his feet.”⁶⁹ Indeed, it is the sight of Bulkington that sharpens Ishmael’s resolve “... that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore.”⁷⁰ Ishmael’s further claim that “... in landlessness alone resides the highest truth...”⁷¹ demonstrates that the rhetorical device of “setting to sea” is essential to the text’s wider philosophical purpose.

It is the sea that provides the vantage point from which Ishmael can make his ontological observations, and map out his historical and cultural environs. In leaving the land, Ishmael is able to float momentarily between the beats of his time out into unknown waters to articulate ideas that are also in themselves, largely unmapped. His meditations

on representation, being and truth are fragments of an anti-foundational survey which can only take place at sea. This type of surveying or mapping is an essentially aphoristic activity in that it once again demonstrates the speculative, dangerous and accidental capacities of the process of naming. From his watery vantage point Ishmael has the power to restructure his cultural time and space; to “discover” or rename ancient places. Truth, representation and self, like the islands of Tahiti or New Zealand, are new lands observed from the forecastle deck, circumnavigated, yet left uncolonised.

Such voyages of discovery, however, do not come without their perils, and it must be remembered that with any setting of sail comes also the possibility of accident and mistake, and the philosopher’s error may well leave blood on the shoreline. This is a possibility that Ishmael lays out in “The Masthead”, the chapter in which he warns of the dangers of “...unseasonable meditateness...” and the pitfalls of those “Platonists” who set to sea as an escape from the “...carking cares of earth”⁷² Such an over-indulgence in philosophical ruminations for their own sake and a lack of attention to material reality, warns Ishmael, turns good Nantucket men into “...vacant, unconscious...absent-minded youth...” who finally lose their identities and become all at sea:

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through the transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists.⁷³

This warning foretells the fate of the *Pequod*’s crew and Ishmael himself who, we remember, ends up struggling within just such a “Cartesian vortex” as the novel ends.

If by setting to sea Ishmael is able to redraw some of the Old World's maps, then his compass in this task is firmly set towards the East. Unlike those frontier-bound adventurers on the mainland heading westward in droves, the *Pequod* and her assemblage of nationalities set their sights on the Eastern horizon. The significance of going East in Moby-Dick has been left somewhat under-analysed by Melvillian scholarship, although the markers of its importance are scattered throughout the text. At the time that Melville was writing, however, Eastern influences were evident throughout Europe, with British and European colonisers building their empires throughout India, Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Middle East, and returning with stories and objects to bring the exotic into the domestic context. Thoreau's and Emerson's writing contains various references to Eastern thought, while Melville himself compared Hawthorne's favourable reception to Moby-Dick to being given the "Crown of India."⁷⁴ The East, in this sense, held a resonant position in the mid-nineteenth century imagination, representing the exotic and mysterious allure of people and lands apparently not yet brought under the rule of Western structures of thought.

References to the East proliferate throughout Moby-Dick. However, this is not simply to add some exotic flavour to the tale being told, rather, it is the paradigmatic binary of East/West that is foregrounded and made complex in the text. The *Pequod* is pursuing an Eastern course in search of Ahab's nemesis, Moby-Dick. On board the *Pequod* are various men of assorted nationalities who are, as Ishmael tells us, a band of "*Isolatoos*" ... "...an Anacharsis Cloutz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth ..."⁷⁵ The journey East taken by this ragged band of men who represent the range of religions and ethnicities known to the mid-nineteenth century mind happens on the no-

mans-land of the sea. It is here, where the hierarchy of West over East is to some degree levelled out, that Ishmael is able to question significant Western notions concerning science, religion and art among other things and contemplate Eastern alternatives as well. An example of this occurs in "The Needle", where the philosophical markers of the East/West dualism are placed under scrutiny. Having already destroyed the ship's quadrant, which he describes as a "foolish toy" of science,⁷⁶ Ahab, in "The Needle", further undermines the scientific arsenal by replacing the *Pequod's* compass with his own construction after the original compass was wrecked during a thunderstorm.

So, "The Needle" and the chapters surrounding it underline the instability of the East/West oppositional paradigm and bring central tenets of Western thinking into question. More significantly though, they provide a backdrop against which the drama of both Eastern and Western concepts of subjectivity can be played out. Ahab, who performs the tragic role of Cartesian subject, obsessively pursuing this subjectivity to the point of extinction, is the inverted double of Pip the cabin boy, who loses his selfhood after being abandoned at sea.

Pip's story on the *Pequod* is brief, telling of how his initially "...pleasant, genial, jolly brightness..."⁷⁷ is extinguished after being made a castaway of the whaling boat from which he had jumped during a harpooning expedition. Pip fails to heed Stubbs' advice to "Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I won't pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama..."⁷⁸ and casts himself upon the mercy of the ocean when the boat is upset by a whale coming too close to it. Abandoned to the intolerable loneliness

of the sea, Pip loses his selfhood to the expanding horizons of the east around him. His ordeal is expressed in terms that form a type of grotesque of the Eastern concept of enlightenment:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather, carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-mermen, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom and spoke of it; and thereafter his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal and woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.⁷⁹

The Eastern *aphanisis* tracked by Pip in Moby-Dick and the totalising trajectory of the West that Ahab characterises are both revealed by Ishmael as being ontologically destructive. Both extremes of East and West ultimately lead to those "Descartian vortices" that Ishmael warns of within which the identity and the promise of stable subjectivity are destroyed. In "The Try-Works" Ishmael is allowed some insight into this truth when he reports the events of a waking dream in which the *Pequod* and her crew become a savage vision of terror to his paranoid mind's eye: "...the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul."⁸⁰ It is clear by now that Ahab's burning trajectory leads only to darkness and death. However, the close of this chapter reveals a similar fate for the more passive path of the contemplative. It is contemplation and inaction that allows Ishmael to fall asleep at the helm and almost destroy the *Pequod*, prompting him to warn, "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me."⁸¹ For Ishmael the

clear path must lie between the extremes of Ahab's destructive selfhood and the passive relinquishment of self that "The Try-Works" chapter warns against in the fate of Pip. This middle path is represented for Ishmael in the figure of the eagle who is able to "...alike dive down into the blackest gorges and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces."⁸² The eagle suggests here that between the collapsed and muted self of Eastern aporias and imploding self of Western tragic paradigms lies the possibility of an alternative vision of truth and identity without the complete obliteration of subjectivity. It offers some hope of rescue from the "closing vortex". And indeed, it is the rescued Ishmael, straddling time and space, east and west, in the narrator's privileged position, who lives to tell the tale.

In presenting the binary limits of Eastern and Western versions of subjectivity, Melville deconstructs the prevailing epistemological conditions of both. Ahab is a monomaniac, singularly concerned with his own quest against Nature; while Pip is so lacking in self-awareness or selfhood that he finally loses all powers of expression when there is no longer anything to express. On the other hand, Moby-Dick introduces various other possibilities of being into the discussion, and other means by which representation might occur. While this narrative thread is not developed in a very obvious fashion, nonetheless, it does whisper beneath the main beat of the story as a kind of half-discernable counter rhythm.

One such possibility for escape from the double bind of East/West thought is offered in the figure of Queequeg, the Maori harpooner who, in early chapters of the novel, becomes like a wife to Ishmael. He is described by Ishmael as being able to circulate freely within

“... the polite society of a civilized town...”⁸³ yet remain always “... entirely at ease with himself; preserving the utmost serenity; content with his own companionship; always equal to himself.”⁸⁴ In this sense he is somewhere between the extremes of self considered within the stories of Ahab or Pip, and his modes of speaking and being seem to exceed those offered by their East/West binary. The strength of this excess is figured within the text as a language, but it is a language not like any other examined by Ishmael in his various studies of the “monstrosities” and disfigurements of other representational systems. Queequeg’s sense of identity is represented as the tattoo, and this tattoo, which literally writes the history and context of his world as an alternative language of the flesh, points towards methods of truth and versions of self that might counter the seemingly impregnable discourse offered by Ahab, or invigorate the final silences of the Eastern self offered by Pip.

It is significant that the tattoo is one “language” which has colonised Western traditions. The use of tattoo in Pacific cultures as historical or genealogical representation was taken up by whalers and sealers and other sailors to mark out the narratives of their lives and times at sea. It is an instance in which anterior representational strategies are taken up and used to mark out other subject positions discernable within dominant modes of being. The tattoo, in this sense, breaks down singular subjectivity into multiple subject positions. Each sailor’s story is written differently and so, in speaking through the tattoo, the sailor necessarily invokes a discourse of the Other to become, in some sense, Other. Ishmael’s fascination with Queequeg’s ease of being and clear sense of self-knowledge, provides a contrast to the other shattered subjectivities presented within the text. It offers an alternative mode of being to the staid world of shore life or the mad world aboard the

Pequod. Although like everyone else in the crew Queequeg is lost to the depths in the ultimate destruction of the ship, nonetheless, the “marriage” that Ishmael enacts with him at the Nantucket inn sustains him on the journey at sea and indeed, it is Queequeg’s coffin, refashioned as a lifebouy, that saves him from drowning in the final maelstrom.

V

Moby-Dick maps the “loomings” or shadowlands of anti-foundationalism; the faintly seen forms of the Modern as they emerge from Enlightenment mists. Ishmael’s future-anterior narrative of the hunt for the White Whale gestures at epistemological possibilities beyond Cartesian rationality and places questions of representation, power and subjectivity at the foreground of the text. In this way, Moby-Dick is the first aphoristic American text; not in the canonical sense, although clearly it is a paradigmatically canonical work, but rather in the degree to which it establishes the lexicon and method used by later anti-foundational writers to interrogate their own historical and cultural contexts. In the novel, Melville asks and offers a range of answers to key ontological questions through a language and modality so radical that its scope is really only beginning to be addressed in current critical responses.

The web of traditional critical debate in which Moby-Dick is enmeshed has focused its attention on questions of myth, symbol and “meaning” in the novel. From revivalists to revisionists and on to the various postmodernist readings of the novel, the rhetorical construction of the text is overlooked; its accidental and haphazard nature and its refusal to complete the hermeneutic pact of fiction writing is ignored in favour of analysing the metaphors and symbols which proliferate throughout the work. Aside from William Spanos, who reads Moby-Dick as an intuitive and parodically constructed precursor to

Heidegger, there is largely a lack of scholarly attention given to the structure and modality of the novel and an emphasis placed on decoding signs that are taken as meanings on the part of critics with a range of agendas too extensive to fully address in this study.

Yet it is in the structure and modality of Moby-Dick that much of its provocative force can be found. Like the first critics of the novel, those contemporary readers who found the work inconsistent, overblown, extreme, sometimes boring and often baffling, this discussion seeks to bring the question of the novel's construction to the fore. While those early readers were in some cases quite appalled by the medley of genres that Melville employed in the construction of the text, it is in this very act of bringing the reader's attention to the rhetorical status of writing that the text's gestures towards the Modern can be discerned. This novel, perhaps more than any other work from Matthiessen's American Renaissance, is the one that most seeks to confront and map the experience of living through the collapse of Enlightenment paradigms and witnessing the stirrings of Modernity.

Moby-Dick is a novel constructed as and from aphorism; the fragmentary and disordered counter-rhythm of narrative; the exposure to *contretemps*, contingency and uncertainty, that accompanies the act of representation. Moby-Dick is a Derridean "... rendezvous with death ..."²⁸⁵, a liminal journey towards fragmentary, multiple worlds where time and space; East and West; and other oppositions come undone upon the unnamed, unnameable and unmappable shore of *contretemps*. The *Pequod's* voyage away from the safe harbours of Nantucket and towards the dangerous waters of the unknown begins the

course which will be charted further in this study's examination of anti-foundational, aphoristic responses to American historical and cultural crises.

¹ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, pp418-419

² Ibid

³ Reising, R. The Unusable Past: Theory and Study of American Literature. NY: Methuen, 1986, pp72-73

⁴ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p422

⁵ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, ppxiii-iv

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, pxiii

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid, piv

¹⁰ Ibid, pp546-547

¹¹ Ibid, pp547-548

¹² Matthiessen, F.O. American Renaissance. London: Oxford University Press, 1941, p656

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, pp418-419

¹⁵ Spanos, W.V. The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p58

¹⁶ Ibid, p54

¹⁷ Spanos, W.V. The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p60

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Hutcheon, L. Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox, New York: Methuen, 1980, p50

²⁰ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992 p418

²¹ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p11

²² Spanos, W.V. The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, pp56-60

²³ Pease, D. E. Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context Durham: Duke University Press, 1987, pp243-244

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p521

²⁶ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, pp416-417

²⁷ Ibid, p418

²⁸ Ibid, p423

²⁹ Ibid, p419

³⁰ Ibid, p418

³¹ Melville, H. Pierre or the Ambiguities. Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1971, p141

³² Blackmur, R.P. "The Craft of Herman Melville: A Putative Statement", in The Lion and the Honeycomb: Essays in Solitude and Critique. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955, p132

³³ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p192

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Melville, H. (1981). Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories. NY: Bantam Classics, 1981, p75

³⁶ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p251

³⁷ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, pp416-7

³⁸ Aristotle, The Poetics, retrieved from <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>, Dec 15, 2001

³⁹ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, pp163-169

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp153-159

⁴¹ See for example Matthiessen, F.O. American Renaissance. London: Oxford University Press, 1941, p308

⁴² Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p156

⁴³ Ibid, pp156-157

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp178-186

⁴⁵ Ibid, p178

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp156-157

⁴⁷ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p423

⁴⁸ Derrida, J. Of Grammatology, retrieved from [Philosophy Archive @ marxists.org](http://philosophyarchive.org/marxists.org), Dec 13, 2001

⁴⁹ Aristotle, The Poetics, retrieved from <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>, Dec 15, 2001

⁵⁰ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, pp428-430

⁵¹ Ibid, p477

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid, p11

⁵⁴ Ibid, p520

⁵⁵ See Spanos, W.V. The Errant Art of Moby Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, pp142-146

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, F. The Will to Power. Kaufmann, W. and Hollingdale, R.J. (trans) NY: Vintage, 1968, p135

⁵⁷ Melville, H. Moby-Dick. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p179

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p421

⁶⁰ Ibid, p420

⁶¹ Ibid, p421

⁶² Matthiessen, F.O. American Renaissance. London: Oxford University Press, 1941, p287

⁶³ Lewis, R.W.B. The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, p142

⁶⁴ Ibid

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- ⁶⁵ Pease, D. "Doing Justice to C. L. R. James's Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways", *boundary 2* 27.2 (2000) pp1-19 retrieved from <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/boundary/v027/27.2pease.html>, Dec 1, 2001
- ⁶⁶ Spanos, W.V. *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War and the Struggle for American Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p221
- ⁶⁷ Melville, H. *Moby-Dick*. NY: Bantam Classics, 1986, p442
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, p12
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, p105
- ⁷⁰ Ibid
- ⁷¹ Ibid
- ⁷² Ibid, p151
- ⁷³ Ibid, p152
- ⁷⁴ Ibid, p535
- ⁷⁵ Ibid, p117
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, p456
- ⁷⁷ Ibid, p380
- ⁷⁸ Ibid, p382
- ⁷⁹ Ibid, p383-384
- ⁸⁰ Ibid, p390
- ⁸¹ Ibid, p392
- ⁸² Ibid
- ⁸³ Ibid, p39
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, p56
- ⁸⁵ Derrida, J. "Aphorism Countertime", in *Acts of Literature*. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p432

**“The Sequence of Force”: Aphorism,
Modernity and The Education of Henry
Adams**

I

In 1900, Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of two American presidents; a diplomat, intellectual, teacher and novelist of note, an Emersonian “American Scholar”, *par excellence*, found his great lineage emptied of all relevance as he stood in front of the exhibition of the dynamo at the Great Exposition in Paris, his “historical neck broken.”¹

The dynamo and the force of electricity that it contained, he writes in The Education of Henry Adams, is “... a symbol of infinity ... a moral force...”², the kind of infinite and moral force capable of throwing the steady traditions of a privileged education into chaos. Worse, Adams’ experience at the foot of the dynamo nullified not only his education, but also his identity itself. The dynamo represented more than just the pinnacle of scientific invention, it was emblematic of the coming of a new world born out of the climate of chaos and rupture. The task for the Emersonian man at the turn of the nineteenth century was now to crawl along “the knife edge” between two inexorably divided kingdoms of force: the past, represented by the mysteries of the Virgin, and the future, represented by the dynamo, and in some way try to make sense of this split; this schism between the new world and all that had preceded it.³

The sense of impending chaos and ontological confusion that Henry Adams invokes as he is metaphorically prostrated at the foot of the dynamo resonates throughout The Education of Henry Adams. The text examines the fate of key foundational concepts of Enlightenment epistemology, specifically the Cartesian *cogito* and dialectical progress, under the forces of an emerging modernity that is structured not by synthesis, Spirit or the fully present Self, but rather by the forces of the material world. This chapter considers The Education of Henry Adams as an aphoristic text, both because of its epistemological

concerns, and because, in its own modality, it exposes the relationship between the will to truth and the processes of language. In a self-conscious and ironical employment of rhetoric, The Education of Henry Adams draws attention to the mechanisms which construct a Western, specifically American, hermeneutic of stable subjectivity and progress, and is, in this sense, an extreme example of the concerns important to many American writers and poets working in the early years of the twentieth century.

Perhaps even more than the better known and more frequently discussed work of modernist American poets such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot, Adams expresses in his writing both the sense of dread and the surge of anticipation of the modern American poised to enter a new century. And while of course those modernist poets were producing shattered and fragmentary works to express the nature of this complex period, nonetheless, what Adams does in The Education of Henry Adams arguably operates in a more complex relationship to the actual material of American history and culture by specifically raising major questions of American being in relation to specifically American history and thought. The Education of Henry Adams, in this sense, raises key concerns about being an American at the turn of the century that other writers, like those more often discussed poets, might bypass in favour of wider, more universal themes.

While the importance of The Education of Henry Adams within the American intellectual tradition is generally undisputed, nonetheless, within the critical field there is disagreement concerning the purposes at work within the text, its implications for readers and other writers, for history, and for conceptions of the “American Self”. This chapter

considers these responses and the manner by which the text has been widely and oppositionally received as a humanist, anti-humanist, modernist and proto-postmodernist work. The disparate nature of the critical project that surrounds the text demonstrates its resistance to scholarly containment. Its generically hybrid form and fragmentary construction means that critics from diverse disciplines and methodologies make a variety of claims over the text for their own disciplinary purposes. These critical projects are subsequently diverse, complex, and contradictory, and in their efforts to harness it to their purposes, they also foreground the aphoristic nature of the text.

II

The image of Henry Adams left broken at the exhibition of the dynamo during the Great Exposition of Paris in 1900 starkly reflects the accelerating forces of change at the *fin-de-siècle*. The site of this historical and personal rupture could not have been more symbolic considering the degree to which, as exemplars of progress made visible, World's fairs and expositions enact a turn of the century hunger for the innovative and the modern.

Michael Frisch notes this in "Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment" a paper initially delivered as his Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, in October, 2000:

World's fairs in general have been multidimensional prisms more than singular narratives...embody[ing], quite transparently, all that was in motion in American culture and society at the dawn of the twentieth century, and all that was contested and complex in the project of resituating the U.S. in relation to the hemisphere and the world.⁴

Henry Adams' reaction to the "prismatic" Great Exposition of Paris 1900 demonstrates that the advancements in technology and social changes of the mid-nineteenth century had gathered momentum and combined to produce "contested and complex"

transformations in the social and economic conditions in America at the turn of the century. During this time, science and industry revolutionised transportation, and significant developments in communication technology occurred. The wider emergence of an urban society fuelled the demand for entertainment and spectacle. Comic strips, musicals, the first modern Olympic Games in Athens and the first plot-driven American film, The Great Train Robbery, all became part of the array of popular amusements which would meet and maintain this demand.

Changes to the social and economic fabric of American life were similarly reflected in the intellectual, aesthetic and political spheres of the *fin-de-siècle*. In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams discusses the importance of Marxism for the educated twentieth century man, and he also discusses the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution at length. Along with Marxism and Darwinianism, however, the influence of Nietzschean thought, the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis and the radical work of artists such as Cézanne, Braque and Picasso and writers like Henry James and W.B. Yeats, added to this sense of cultural propulsion, a sense which Yeats describes in his 1899 poem "He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace" as like being assailed by "...Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake/Their Hooves heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white/..."⁵

The Education of Henry Adams emerges from this context of extreme social, economic and political upheaval. During the years of the *fin-de-siècle* the experiences of the American people underwent numerous revolutions of habit and expectation. David Harvey considers the turn of the nineteenth century to be a time when a general awareness of change led to a pervading sense of instability which, in turn, expressed itself

as the experience of time-space compression.⁶ This mood of disjuncture is explained in Derridean terms as the conditions of *contretemps*; the sense of a disturbance to regular cultural rhythms. For Henry Adams, the point of separation between 1899 and 1900 is the outward sign of this disturbance. The world that comes after the old world has passed over is one subject to force rather than to design. Force disrupts the progressive shape of historical and cultural continuity and lets chaos and multiplicity into the world in a way not seen, says Adams, since 310 AD when "... Constantine set up the Cross...".⁷

Furthermore, the irrefutable proof of chaos and multiplicity which sends Hegelian versions of history spinning out of orbit and Darwinian doctrines of Natural Evolution and Natural Uniformity into disarray, arouses Adams' more existential suspicion that being subject to "force" was precisely the permanent human condition. As such, all versions of unity: religion, science, art and most particularly history, were simply dreams or myths. Perhaps, as he says, there were always only "... lines of force constituting the world..." rather than "... lines of will..." as he previously been taught to believe.⁸

In its foregrounding of force and chaos The Education of Henry Adams exhibits the conditions of *contretemps*. Like the dynamo that brings chaos to the world, the text reveals emerging lines of force against fading lines of progressive history, within the self-reflexive and ironical framing narrative of a Classical education gone bad. In its generic indeterminacy and ironic display of rhetorical agility, it announces itself as an aphoristic text. Through disruptions to traditionally inscribed expectations of structure, content and genre, the work ranges widely over an enormous field of intellectual matter, yet makes little effort to bring it under authorial control. And in drawing attention to its own state

as self-fictionalisation, it exposes the rhetorically founded instabilities of wider American self-fictionalising ontologies and epistemologies.

The first dilemma that readers face when approaching The Education of Henry Adams is the question of genre. The book's title, its "Editor's Preface" and "Preface" sections, all imply that it is an autobiographical work; the story of the life and times of an eminent American intellectual. However, in a review that appeared in the *Athenaeum* in 1919, one year after The Education of Henry Adams was publicly released for publication, T.S. Eliot warned of such an assumption, writing: "The really impressive interest is in the mind of the author, and in the American mind, or that fragment of it, which he represents... It is doubtful whether the book ought to be called an autobiography, for there is too little of the author in it".⁹

Eliot comment draws into relief the unsettled birth of The Education of Henry Adams as a published work and the approach taken to it by various disciplines, most specifically history, literature, American Studies and Sociology, as either historical record or aesthetic artefact. The Education of Henry Adams was first released to the public in 1918 under the auspices of the Massachusetts Historical Association after Adams' death. However, the work was actually written in 1905 as a companion piece to Adams' *Mont-Saint-Michel* and *Chartes* and was privately printed in 1907 for a select audience of about one hundred readers. This initial audience was asked to proofread the work and strike out any offending passages as they saw fit.¹⁰ John Carlos Rowe describes this instruction as an authorial ruse, since the publishers, Furst and Company "...had printed one hundred beautiful copies unlikely to be "marked" by friends in the manner requested; indeed only

three copies were known to be returned to Adams.”¹¹ The ruse of the first circulation of the text was just one among several in the publication of this work, however. Another is the “Preface”, which is dated “February 16, 1907”, Adams’ sixty-ninth birthday. As well, the “Editor’s Preface” was written by Adams himself in 1918 just prior to the public publication of the work by the Massachusetts Historical Society and presumably just prior to his own death, given that this edition finally appeared six months after that event. This preface was enclosed with the manuscript and was sent to the editor of the Society, Henry Cabot Lodge, with the request that Lodge sign the document as if he himself had composed it.¹²

The purpose of such behaviour has puzzled scholars and several have made efforts to speculate about the complicated publication history of the work, linking it to Adams’ apparently cantankerous nature or with his morbid dislike of critics and reviewers.¹³ More than anything else, however, this entry of the book into publication underlines, as Eliot reminded contemporary readers, that the subtitle “An Autobiography” was deceiving and did not necessarily reflect the purpose or significance of the work; that it is precisely the dissolution of selfhood that is foregrounded in the narration of the slowly disappearing protagonist and not the presentation of autobiographical tidbit or matters of historical event.

The question of genre has been one of the key elements in the reception and interpretation of The Education of Henry Adams. The wider criticism and scholarship surrounding the text shows that its position as an “American Classic” is simultaneously endorsed “history”, “literature” and more recently “interdisciplinary”. This span of genres is

reflected in the critical response to the work, which emerges also from this range of disciplines. However, although it was very well received upon public publication in 1918 and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in the category of autobiography in 1919, and it was and continues to be written about quite extensively, The Education of Henry Adams has not, as Paul Bové writes "...been made suspect by success."¹⁴ An examination of the critical field surrounding the work bears out this claim. The Americanist critics whose interests lay in the works of the writers of the mid-nineteenth century American Renaissance tended to deal with The Education of Henry Adams as a peripheral interest if at all, while those who directly attempted to take on the challenge of the work, such as R. P. Blackmur or Ernest Samuels, met their own particular difficulties. Both, as later critics also continue to do, seemed intent on investigating the biographical details of The Education of Henry Adams, or speculating on the "truth" behind the book.

While biographical studies have foundered somewhat, a more significant slant on the work is that found within the scholarship of Perry Miller. Miller's seminal text The New England Mind creates from the rhetoric of the Puritans a rhetorical emblem of America. In the jeremiads of the Puritans, argues Miller, there is an intact version of the shaping agency of the American national identity. As a rhetorical invention of rhetorical scholarship, the construct of the "Puritan Mind" in American thought and writing has a bearing on the study here. It stands as an aphorism; a seemingly enclosed point of truth which, upon closer consideration, is a fragmentary incidence of rhetoric that speaks the conditions of wider and more material disjunctures.

The first volume of Miller's The New England Mind contains only one index entry for "Henry Adams", however, its thesis, that the "Augustinian strain of piety" of the

seventeenth century American Puritans gave rise to the American mind, certainly encompasses Adams' vision of history and subjectivity as it is expressed in The Education of Henry Adams. Miller's thesis establishes a genus in the Puritan experience for an American state of being that he argues has produced all that is peculiarly American about America: its arts, letters and ideology. Such is the state of being that we can observe, he argues, in the work of Adams.¹⁵ The sense of "...not being at home within the universe ... and not good enough to deserve better ... out of touch with the grand harmony ... an incongruous being amid the creatures, a blemish and a blot upon the face of nature ..."¹⁶ is the sense of loss and dislocation that we read constantly throughout The Education of Henry Adams. In part, it is this sense of being out of his own time that positions the text as an expression of *contretemps*, and it is the rhetorical strategies that construct the text that connect it to a genealogy of American aphorism.

The "Puritan Mind" has been a troubling factor for other scholars, many of whom do not share Miller's sense of the complexity of the tradition, and although The New England Mind significantly shaped the scope and method of twentieth century American history, nonetheless, as David Harlan argues in The Degradation of American History, in recent times "... the kind of history [Miller] wrote has been shoved to the margins of American historical thought."¹⁷ Harlan's work considers the limitations for historical production of the recent scholarly turn to the methodologies of the social sciences. In the course of this discussion, he positions the career and writing of Sacvan Bercovitch against that of Perry Miller. Bercovitch, described by Harlan as, "... Perry Miller's apparent successor and now the leading authority on American Puritanism"¹⁸ wrote two influential books in the 1970s, The Puritan Origins of the American Self (1975) and The American Jeremiad

(1978). Both confront what Bercovitch sees as the dichotomous nature of Miller's work which is able to detect nothing between one pole and its opposite, and makes interpretations of the primary Puritan works "...as certain psychologists interpret wish-fulfilment dreams."¹⁹ Bercovitch's analysis of the Puritan Mind stands in contrast to Miller's in tone, colour and temperament. The jeremiad, as Bercovitch explains it:

... was the ritual of a culture on an errand – which is to say, a culture based on faith in process ... Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped to release the restless "progressivist" energies required for the success of the venture ... Like all "traditionalist" forms of ritual, it used fear and trembling to teach acceptance of fixed social norms. But the American Puritan jeremiad went much further. It made anxiety its end as well as its means. Crisis was the social norm it sought to inculcate ... New England's Jeremiahs set out to provide the sense of insecurity that would ensure the outcome. Denouncing or affirming. Their vision fed on the distance between promise and fact.²⁰

So when Miller finds the despair and inconsolability of the self who is "not at home in the universe"²¹, Bercovitch discovers the "...pervasive themes of affirmation and exultation"²², leading to "fixed social norms" and an assurance of the outcome, in this case, the success of America itself. The fear and retribution presented in the jeremiad tradition, the climate of crisis and anxiety that it fostered was not "real", then, it was merely rhetorical social control. In fact, as he argues, the American Puritan jeremiad was actually a cause for celebration because:

Theirs was a peculiar mission ... for they were a "peculiar people," a company of Christians not only called but chosen, and chosen not only for heaven but as instruments of a sacred historical design. Their church-state was to be at once a model of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come. To this end, they revised the message of the jeremiad. Not that they asserted it with a ferocity unparalleled in the European pulpit. But they qualified it in a way that turned threat into celebration. In their case, they believed, God's punishments were *corrective*, not destructive.²³

The "mission" for which these "peculiar people" had been chosen, however, is revealed by Bercovitch in the course of The American Jeremiad, to be the mission to create, as

William Hooke wrote in 1645, “... not onely a spirituall glory ... but also an external and visible glory²⁴, or in Bercovitch’s terms the “... astonishing cultural hegemony ...”²⁵ of free enterprise. To this end, he reads the jeremiad, not as a dark and existential discourse between the “Sinner” and the “Angry God”, as we might see in Miller’s interpretations of Jonathan Edwards, but as a “... vehicle of social control ...”²⁶, a rhetorical instrument of the colonising mission. The Puritan preacher’s purpose was not just to bring sinners to an understanding of their position and fate before a stern deity, but also to enlist these sinners for the purposes of building and then internalising the social controls necessary to be able to realise the vision of “... external and visible glory.”²⁷ Such a thesis reveals the Puritan Mind to be fixed, not just on the promise of deliverance in the hereafter, but also on a comfortable and prosperous experience of the here and now.

This crucial scholarly duel, with its contrast between Bercovitch’s bright neo-Marxist vision and Miller’s much darker reading of the Puritan mind, is important to the analysis of The Education of Henry Adams. Firstly, it is an example of the rhetorical whirlpools at play within the historical field of American thought, where rhetoric is employed as ground and method for the analysis of American rhetorical texts. Secondly these rhetorical methods have implications for the position of The Education of Henry Adams in the American literary and historical genealogy.

In the epilogue to The American Jeremiad, Bercovitch claims Adams’ work as an “anti-jeremiad”; a text that “... reverses all the effects of the jeremiad while retaining intact the jeremiad’s figural-symbolic outlook”²⁸ This claim is far-reaching in its implications for reading the American canon because, like the jeremiad, the anti-jeremiad in Bercovitch’s

analysis in fact is "... not so much a rejection of culture as it is a variation on a central cultural theme. Wherever it appears ... it has served to confirm the cosmic import of the American Way."²⁹ Bercovitch reads The Education of Henry Adams finally as an endorsement and emblem of the "old faith"; a sermon against the "... tragic course of American history ..." but also a reminder that the promise, yet unfulfilled, is still contained within the symbols and histories of America.³⁰ In this way, he brings the disparate material of The Education of Henry Adams into line with his pre-fabricated hermeneutic. He finds unity precisely within Adams' own expressions of multiplicity and lines of force, grounding the text's cultural anxiety, not in the chaos of the time or the existential moment of the self at the abyss, but rather in the hegemony of Puritan rhetoric, which, as is his argument, was designed to survive the "... failure of theocracy" as the latter-day orthodoxy of Imperial America.³¹ In this way, The Education of Henry Adams becomes, in the final analysis, a simple "... variation on a cultural theme."³²

While Bercovitch's powerful analysis of the American Mind has become dominant in recent times, displacing the vision of Puritanism offered by Perry Miller, it does not seem adequate as an explanation for the modality and position of The Education of Henry Adams within the American canon. The anti-jeremiad thesis divests the work of its insurgent qualities, making "Those classic texts that had always seemed so deeply unsettling and radically subversive turn out to be rhetorically conformist and culturally conservative."³³ Bercovitch's reading of The Education of Henry Adams as part of an acculturation process that knows only the Emersonian dichotomy "Beyond America, *nothing* ..." ³⁴, ultimately reduces Adams' meditations on chaos, history and failure to being a mechanistic habit.

Yet, Henry Adams was not simply fulfilling his manifest destiny, to write simultaneous lament and celebration of America, in spite of himself, but rather was expressing the experience of one whose “historical neck is broken”, of one who is “out of time” with his own life as well that of his historical lineage. Adams’ work seems more related to the vision of American literature offered in Perry Miller’s work, who finds the Augustinian mindset endlessly mysterious, complex and worthy of attention, with its oscillations between despair and hope, darkness and light, illusion and truth, and its constant search for unity with God and overwhelming despondency at failure in this task; and its realisation that “the world says, peace, peace, peace, then suddenly destruction comes upon them like a whirlwind...”.³⁵ In Miller’s reading, Henry Adams’ work is released from the safe predestination of Bercovitch’s analysis, and the field of discussion is opened to “...a lawless force that flashes through the night in unexpected brilliance...”.³⁶

Like Miller’s approach, John Carlos Rowe’s 1976 work, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness contains a wider acknowledgment of the instabilities and accidental strangeness of the The Education of Henry Adams; a flash perhaps, of that “lawless force”. He applies poststructuralist thought to the canonical texts of Henry Adams and Henry James and in doing so, draws a parallel between the epistemological and ontological crises of the late nineteenth century and those of the later decades of the twentieth century. He uses the language and formulations of poststructural theory: the decentred subject, the breakdown of Cartesian binaries: subject and object, reason and madness, phenomenon and noumenon, the precarious nature of signification, to articulate the web of complexity he finds within The Education of Henry Adams.

While still faithful to some of the key elements of the New Critical Americanist tradition, such as close attention to symbolism, Rowe succeeds in establishing Adams and James as precursors in a lineage of experimental and radical American literature in which they hold the positions of, respectively, existentialist and counter-realist.³⁷

And in more recent discussions of The Education of Henry Adams, Rowe has refined this early application of poststructural thought to Adams' work, notably in the introduction to New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams (1996) and in the essay he writes within this collection, "Henry Adams's *Education* in the Age of Imperialism", in which he examines the complex internal dialectic between Adams the political insider and Adams the ontological outsider.³⁸ His consideration of Adams as the earliest articulation of an American modern consciousness remains intact, however, and has been taken up by other critics such as Joseph Riddel in "Reading America/American Readers"³⁹, Gregory Jay in America the Scrivener: Deconstruction and the Subject of Literary History⁴⁰ and Wayne Lesser in "Criticism, Literary History and the Paradigm: The Education of Henry Adams"⁴¹. Indeed, the seminal nature of this reading, argues David Horowitz in his essay "The Education and the Salvation of History", has positioned The Education of Henry Adams as "...a proto-modern and finally proto-poststructuralist critique of the categories of history, knowledge, the subject, and ideology. In this view, *The Education*, illustrates the postmodern problematization of judgement, identity, morality, and (in some instances) the very idea of America."⁴²

Like Rowe, Paul Bové is unconvinced of the value of looking at The Education of Henry Adams as autobiography or historical truth. In "Anarchy and Perfection" Henry Adams,

Intelligence, and America”, he describes this approach as “...patently silly.”⁴³ Bové finds that “Treating the text as autobiography allows critics to acknowledge its aesthetic accomplishments and to avoid its implications...”⁴⁴ These implications include “...how to understand Americanism in the United States and in the world; and how to act as critical intellectuals in the face of the increasingly rapid transformations of national and global structures brought about by capital,”⁴⁵ aspects of the text which Bové believes have yet to be given full consideration in the body of criticism on Adams. In the course of his essay, Bové claims that Adams is an “atomist”, a presocratic thinker, a claim that positions The Education of Henry Adams within an anti-foundationalist genealogy stretching from the Sophists through to the European poststructuralists. Instead of an appeal to historicism or autobiography, Bové perceives the uniqueness of The Education of Henry Adams to lie within its radical materialism. As Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger and Derrida point out in various places, historically it is the Material which has been pushed to the margins in the construction of stable foundational thought. Material has been always been sublimated by Spirit. They argue that the central dualisms of Western thought are constructed in this sublimation and this, in turn, converts the energy of the Material into the waste of Spirit. Bové argues that as a radical materialist Adams calls forth these marginal forces against the hegemonic truths of foundational thought. In this elicitation of the Material, we find the strategy of the aphoristic text.

III

Adams signals his aphoristic modality in the title and subtitle of the work. This is the first invocation of a wider aphoristic strategy that indicates a generic category and reading strategy rapidly destabilised upon turning to the first page. The book is fully titled: The

Education of Henry Adams - An Autobiography and, as such, has generated extensive critical inquiry as to what Adams might have been thinking in describing his unorthodox book as “autobiography”. In the introduction to New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams, Rowe refers to Adams’ own insistence that the book should be published without the subtitle An Autobiography, and that he actually wanted “A Study in Twentieth-Century Multiplicity” to appear on the cover instead. This makes for an interesting repositioning of the work as the fragmentation of the form “autobiography” and the further fragmentation of other genres from which autobiography emerges: literature and historical writing. Beyond that, the text is constructed as a fragmentation of key epistemological concerns, like subjectivity and history. Against the reading of The Education of Henry Adams as autobiography, is a reading of the text as the excess of genres; those aspects of writing which are disciplined or marginalised by generic categorisations. The Education of Henry Adams is a documentation in *praxis* of textual transgressions of genre and is constructed from the material ruins of genre.

The subtitle, of The Education of Henry Adams, - An Autobiography - also brings us back to Derrida’s insights into the significance of names and naming. As in Melville’s elicitation of Ishmael’s name in Moby-Dick’s opening line, “Call me Ishmael”, the foregrounding of the name is an “act of literature” which undermines the stability of signification and the authority of narration when it is employed. After the title page of The Education of Henry Adams, we are inducted further into this unstable and uncertain field of naming through two significant “statements” by the “author” of the text: an “Editor’s Preface”, apparently written by Henry Cabot Lodge but actually written by Adams, and a “Preface” dated February 16, 1907, or Adams’ own sixty-ninth birthday.

The intrusion of the author, his name, dates, and those names with which he seeks to disguise his own, remind us of what Derek Attridge calls “... the contrary force of naming... as a cultural practice; in instituting and enforcing spatial homogeneity, it brings into being the possibility of the very accidents... which it is designed to prevent.”⁴⁶

So, the name is traditionally used to invoke a stable subject, however, this subject is, in Derridean terms, like the signifier: always already unstable. Adams’ constructions of several clearly “fictionalised” personae to stand in for himself in the preceding sections of the text, exposes the wider impossibility of authorial presence, even in a work paraded as “autobiography”. Further, as Derrida’s argues in “Aphorism Countertime” the name’s ability to survive the death of the subject with whom it is associated is another significant indicator of its destabilising potential. We continue to speak of “Henry Adams”, even as he is as dead to us as he was to his first reading audience. Yet, as text, he lives on. And so if “Aphorism is the name”⁴⁷ then indeed, aphorism is that which outlives death and is in some sense, the ruins of death. In other words, the act of naming or invoking the act of naming through the act of writing, is a differential dynamic that, in Derridean terms, “lets in” or “admits”, the conditions of *contretemps* to the field of signification.⁴⁸

The unstable practice of naming that Derrida draws out in “Aphorism Countertime” is perhaps already understood by Henry Adams in his presentation of the elaborate and foregrounded question of authorship and ownership in the initial pages of The Education of Henry Adams. Adding to a collapsing sense of genre and authorial agency, the “Preface” also confronts the reader with the idiosyncratic figure of the “manikin”; the device upon which he proposes to drape the “...toilet of education... in order to show the

fit or misfit of the clothes.”⁴⁹ Adams’ employment of the manikin, an inherently cipher-like figure, again draws attention to the destabilised terrain of naming. The relationship between the identity of the manikin and that of the narrator in the text is brought under scrutiny in this section of the work in a manner which insistently interrupts the traditional grammarology of autobiographical writing and reading. If the self is merely a figure upon which certain “garments” can be draped and un-draped, then we can conclude very little about the status of truth or fact in the work except that it is displaced in favour of the manikin/cipher. In “Aphorism Countertime”, Derrida reminds us of the “... fatality of the proper name...”,⁵⁰ the false sense of security that names provide, allowing us to think we have mastered time with its deceptive instruments: “Dates, timetables, property-registers, place-names...”⁵¹. The act of naming and the procession of names is utterly undermined and disputed from the beginning of The Education of Henry Adams.

The instability of the text’s relationship to the generic categories within which it has traditionally been positioned is one clear element of its aphoristic modality. Another is the foregrounded question of authorship and, therefore, the authority of the narrative, through the work’s extensive consideration of the question of naming. Alongside these elements, though, there are other aspects of form and structure in The Education of Henry Adams that clearly indicate the rhetorical foregrounding of the conditions of *contretemps*.

The text begins “Under the shadow of Boston State House...”,⁵² a site which could not have been more auspicious even if, as Adams says, “... he had been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest...”⁵³. The opening lines immediately introduce readers to the voice of the detached and self-conscious narrator, who comments at length upon the events of his own

babyhood and early childhood with the language and manner of an unimpassioned and uninvolved observer. We hear, for example of the three year old Adams contracting scarlet fever and being "... as good as dead ..." ⁵⁴, an incident which is related, not to demonstrate his superior strength or hardiness in surviving the illness, but rather as an opportunity to digress on the way in which suffering brought out the latent "New England-ness" in him. The stunting effects of scarlet fever in terms of height and weight and physical prowess are neither lamented nor celebrated, but rather are presented as the tempering agents to stimulate and propel the New England character to emerge:

The habit of doubt; of distrusting his own judgement and of totally rejecting the judgement of the world; the tendency to regard every question as open; the hesitation to act except as the choice of evils; the shirking of responsibility; the love of line, form, quality; the horror of ennui; the passion of companionship and the antipathy to society – all these are well-known qualities of New England character in no way peculiar to individuals but in this instance they seemed to be stimulated by the fever, and Henry Adams could never make up his mind whether, on the whole, the change of character was morbid or healthy, good or bad for his purpose. His brothers were the type; he was the variation. ⁵⁵

So, the fever is an event which pushes the narrator out of the straightforward rhythms of his life and into the role of observer and commentator almost immediately. From his earliest memories, Adams demonstrates a self-conscious distance from the drama of real events and a propensity for the philosophical analysis of these events from quite unexpected frames of reference. Just as a raging fever which could have killed him reminds him of his inheritance as a New Englander, so too throughout the rest of the book, whenever events of world scale importance or personal significance are being related, the narrative voice, presented as third person narration throughout, skews off into unrelated territory to undermine or underpin the story being told. This interrupted narrative device, already seen in the construction of Moby-Dick, delays readers'

expectations for a teleological narrative structure. Far from being the memoirs of a disappointed New Englander yet to fulfill the promise of his pedigree, The Education of Henry Adams reminds us that the purpose of the work is to position the events of his life in the field of the new forces of modernity within which he feels caught, and by which he is made impotent and rendered mute. As in the construction of Moby-Dick, The Education of Henry Adams works against traditional narrative structures by setting up an atonal and disrhythmic counter-narrative that suspends the acculturated expectations of form that we bring to any reading of any text.

Examples of this narrative strategy are used extensively throughout the text. Key moments of historical significance are frequently juxtaposed against seemingly unrelated meditations on obscure or obtuse subtopics of the main events. The section of the book which deals with the Civil War, for example, is remarkable for the brief and passing mention of the War itself, its origins and effects or its course and conclusion. Rather, the focus is on diversionary tactics: the intricate play of manners within the Washington *milieu* in "Treason"⁵⁶; the dead-ends and inconsequences of diplomacy as discussed in "Diplomacy"⁵⁷; or the relative merits of various soirées during the Adams family stint in London in "Foes or Friends"⁵⁸. The Civil War is offered as a point of absence; an historical blankness which forms the main beat of the narrative but which is drowned out by the counter-beat of failure, cross purpose, and inconsequence. This section, demonstrates what Adams describes as one of his true life's lessons: "The habit of reticence – of talking without meaning ..."⁵⁹, a habit which forms a key strategy in the text's resistance to traditional narrative structure and which again, brings the work within the rhetorical field of aphorism.

In Adams' work narrative synchrony and anachrony rub against each other to create a sense of profound discordance. In the latter part of the book this is particularly apparent in Adams' tirades against eighteenth century educational traditions and their inadequacy for a twentieth century man's needs. This section of the work, that ostensibly deals with Adams' career as an academic and later as a "tourist", a kind of roving friend and professional visitor, contains its most famous and critically discussed chapters, "The Virgin and the Dynamo" and "A Dynamic Theory of History". Here again the unsettling and fragmentary aspects of the text's construction are foregrounded, either by long and elaborate digressions on epistemological concerns or, conversely, by the judicious use of silence or absence. Both rhetorical strategies foreground the way that The Education of Henry Adams has both too much to say about the impending chaos in the world and, more troublingly, nothing to say and nothing that can be said about it at all.

The question of genre, the emphasis on names and naming, and the fragmentary and discordant qualities of the text mark The Education of Henry Adams as an aphoristic work. Like Ishmael, Adams, the equally disembodied and reticent third-person narrator of this text, "hovers over Cartesian vortices", having been carried, a cabin-boy by his own reckoning, into the dangerous and uncharted waters of modernity.⁶⁰ The rhetorical construction of Adams as a diffident and disconnected object of the modern, tossed about by forces that act upon him beyond the constraints of his own will or consciousness, reflects more widely a view of the American self, historically proffered as "self-reliant", now tragically reconfigured as silence, absence and powerlessness.

The collapse of time and space under the forces of modernity is a central concern within The Education of Henry Adams. The text deals specifically and at length with key epistemological questions of history and time, emphasising, as Melville also does in Moby-Dick, their precarious and contested status in the Western tradition. The instruments of time, “... names, hours, maps of places, dates...”⁶¹ which Derrida argues are instituted in order to impose the philosophical logic of history over accidental events, are brought acutely into question here and revealed, not as the framing, ordering or connecting strategies traditionally employed in the production of history, but rather as being dispersed and multiple in their effects. Furthermore, Adams’ enquiry into the nature of historical knowledge focuses specifically on the breakdown of Hegelian dialectics, in which progress is shown to occur through overcoming and the push towards totality:

... Progress appears as an advancing from the imperfect to the more perfect; but the former must not be understood abstractly as *only* the imperfect, but as something that involves the very opposite of itself – the so-called perfect – the a *germ* or impulse. So – reflectively, at least – *possibility* points to something destined to become actual... Thus the Imperfect, as involving its opposite, is a contradiction, which certainly exists, but which is continually annulled and solved; the instinctive movement – the inherent impulse in the life of the soul – to break through the rind of mere nature, sensuousness, and that which is alien to it, and to attain the light of consciousness, that is, to itself.⁶²

Hegel argues that progress occurs in a movement from “Nature” towards “Spirit”, and culminates in the state of self-consciousness of Spirit, or freedom. The Education of Henry Adams, conversely, presents no such possibility, arguing instead that any glimpses of historical order are actually always subsumed in a more primary state of chaos. Adams’ discussion of French mathematician Poincaré’s delineation of a “mathematical paradise of endless displacement...”⁶³ reveals this, showing that although

“... the direction of mind, as a single force of nature, had been constant since time began...”⁶⁴, nonetheless, the nature of this force was an endlessly deferred impossibility:

He took their facts for granted. He knew no more than a firefly about rays – or about race – or sex – or ennui – or a bar of music – or a pang of love – or a grain of musk – or of phosphorus – or conscience – or duty – or the force of Euclidean geometry – or non-Euclidean – or heat – or light – or osmosis – or electrolysis – or the magnet – or ether – or *vis inertiae* – or gravitation – or cohesion – or elasticity – or surface tension – or capillary attraction – or Brownian motion – or, of some scores, or thousands, or millions of chemical attractions, repulsions or indifferences which were busy within and without him; or in brief, of Force itself, which, he was credibly informed, bore some dozen definitions in the textbook, mostly contradictory, and all, as he was assured, beyond his intelligence; but summed up in the dictum of the last and highest science, that Motion seems to be Matter and Matter seems to be Motion, yet we are “probably incapable of discovering” what either is.⁶⁵

The mechanics of this endlessly deferred and incomprehensible force shatters Hegel’s notion of the dialectic. The anti-dialectics of The Education of Henry Adams are radically materialist and anti-humanist in their location of the impetus of historical transformations within the external forces of technology and economy rather than in political and social institutions, as Bové argues.⁶⁶ Yet, these insights can be further placed within a lineage of anti-foundational discourse and the endless deferral of full presence that speaks through an aphoristic modality.

Bové’s essay sets out to investigate the positioning of intellectuals within the context of capitalism. He claims that Adams’ work is unique in its radical materialism; the way that it addresses capitalism and modernity through an investigation of its tools:

Adams is...interested in the double perspective of looking at society through its tools and of comparing that society through its tools with earlier societies in order to both understand the present and, when appropriate, to develop a critical perspective on it.⁶⁷

While this may suggest the possibility of a neo-Marxist approach to the text, Bové is quick to anticipate and deny this possibility, pointing out that, “Adams’ thought is rigorously materialistic without being pragmatic ...”.⁶⁸ In other words, Bové suggests that while Adams would accept the materialist focus of the Marxist version of historical transformation, he would not agree with the mechanisms it implies, in particular the central construct of dialectical materialism. As he writes, “Adams’ anarchism is radically materialist and atomist; this means that he is not a dialectician; that he does not credit evolutionary theory; and that he is a productivist.”⁶⁹ Interestingly, the touchstone that Bové invokes here for his conception of Adams’ radical materialism, presocratic atomism, is situated precisely at the genus of the anti-foundationalist strain.

One clear example of Adams’ position as a radical materialist occurs in the chapter entitled “Teufelsdröckh”, in which Adams discusses the acceleration of social and political transformation throughout Northern Europe. Here, he concludes that the sphere of political power is illusionary and that power actually resides in the forces of technology. Technology, the Material, contains the energies sublimated by the rule of law, of rights, of the social contract. In this way, technology’s re-entry into culture within the conditions of modernity enacts a re-entry of the forces that oppose and disrupt such “civilised” notions as politics or nationhood. The forces of the material will always exceed such constructions. Adams demonstrates this in a proto-postmodern reading of the epistemology of coal. Coal, the “name” of the material is used to demonstrate force of production under modernity:

In 1858 the whole plain of northern Europe, as well as the Danube in the south, bore evident marks of being still the prehistoric highway between Asia and the ocean. The trade-route followed the old routes of invasion, and Cologne was a resting-place between Warsaw and Flanders. Throughout northern Germany,

Russia was felt even more powerfully than France. In 1901 Russia had vanished, and not even France was felt; hardly England or America. Coal alone was felt, - its stamp alone pervaded the Rhine district and persisted to Picardy, - and the stamp was the same as that of Birmingham and Pittsburg. The Rhine produced the same power, and the power produced the same people, - the same mind, - the same impulse... From Hamburg to Cherbourg on one shore of the ocean, - from Halifax to Norfolk on the other, - one great empire was ruled by one great emperor - Coal. Political and human jealousies might tear it apart or divide it, but the power and the empire were one. Unity had gained that ground.⁷⁰

Adams' conceptualisation of a transnational empire, ruled over by the forces of technology that operate to flatten out cultural difference and override political influences demonstrates the sophistication of his understanding of modernity as it was beginning to emerge. The balances of power and geopolitical divides so crucial to nineteenth century brinkmanship are subsumed in his analysis, by the relentless forces of technology, and along with them all of the other trappings of the nation state: government, culture, language, mind. There are obvious parallels here to Nietzsche and Heidegger, in that like Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Heidegger's notion of "becoming", Adams posits a force able to obliterate foundational truths through a deployment of these truths' own excesses or wastes; those sublimated points of resistance elided in the construction of claims to power. Coal erases national borders and national identities by harnessing precisely the ruins of these categories.

Bové's recognition of Adams' radical materialism stands out against the rest of the critical field in many ways. Placed beside Bercovitch's claims that the text is an "anti-jeremiad", or a work that seeks to disturb the hegemony of Puritan American rhetoric, but finally ends up imposing the same set of social controls that Bercovitch sees operating within the original Puritan jeremiads, Bové's recognition of Adams' attention to the transformative aspects of modernity under the power of capitalism is illuminating. It

counters the reduction of The Education of Henry Adams to a “...variation on a cultural theme...”, as Bercovitch argues in The American –Jeremiad,⁷¹ and recognises the text’s fundamental understanding of the revolutionary forces of modernity. This reading, with its attention to the detail of how Adams’ signifies the material in The Education of Henry Adams compares in mood, if not scope, to that which Perry Miller presents in The New England Mind. In Miller’s work, the essential darkness and secrecy of the universe breaches the relationship between God and Man. Its mystery stains that relationship and so sets up a field in which communion between the two is endlessly deferred. This deferral is constructed as rhetoric. The sinner longs to be united with God in flesh, not just in word. However, the word is the only recourse available to express the prevailing sense of loss within the mind of the sinner. This is the Puritan tragedy. Bové’s reading The Education of Henry Adams similarly examines the tragic tension between a desire for unity and a recognition that unity is always deferred by the energy of those elements that are necessarily excluded in the formation of any unifying construct.

Adams’ understanding of the changing nature of geopolitics and culture under the forces of capitalism, then, configures America and Americanism as, in Bové’s words,

...mass and motion without intelligence ...capitalism as endless transformation of society and subjectivities...intellectuals as insufficiently materialist and caught within the process of substitution and transformation...the succession of different orders of society within a larger cosmos of chaos.⁷²

Adams’ insight into the nature of chaos as material is possibly the first instance of an intellectual radicalism that pushes critiques of capitalism beyond the purely economic, as we might see in Marxist or neo-Marxist theory, where analysis tends to be fettered by the machinery of the dialectic. The range of Adams’ argument anticipates, in many ways,

Bataille, who, as Steven Shaviro notes in Passion and Excess, explains the disruptions of capitalism not in terms of class conflicts, but as an underlying need for excess and expenditure.⁷³ In Bataille's view, beyond the dialectics contained within our historical conceptions there lies a larger dialectic which operates between our very notions of history and the ceaseless movement towards sacrifice and excess, "... accidents that violently extricate us from historical context and linear order are in themselves arbitrary waste products of the most overdetermined historical movements."⁷⁴ These are the same forces of excess and waste that Adams' identifies at least twenty-five years earlier: "Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force."⁷⁵

Adams' attention to the "sequence of force", like Bataille's later on, positions him, as he describes it, as "tourist" or outsider to the events of history which he is describing. A tourist observes culture but cannot engage with or even locate its more hidden aspects; a tourist comes to look, to photograph, to document, but a tourist does not come to stay. Like Miller's Puritans, a tourist is never "at home". The siting of Adams as intellectual and materialist tourist reverberates throughout the narrative's structure, as we have already seen, offering a text distanced to the reader by its disembodied voice. Further though, as the perennial visitor, Adams the intellectual is never, as Bové says, "... contemporary with his time at all."⁷⁶ As he explains this:

Contemporaneity is always with the past as it was coming to be known, but the chaos which overwhelms that knowable past order in the anarchy of transformation makes that knowledge a burden and obstacle which must be transgressed often in the act of discovering its inherent ignorance, its non-fit with the emerging and leading orders. In that the intellectual cannot rebuild the broken vessel of knowledge shattered by capital's movements Adams

analyzes how the past acquires value for the present only insofar as the present can commodify it.⁷⁷

Adams' role as extemporaneous day-tripper, then, pinpoints him precisely within the field of *contretemps*. He recognises, as Derrida says, the status of history as "... fiction and its simulacra ..."; the proliferating excesses of representation. Adams observes historical events, documents them as text and, but more crucially, in his insistence on the deferred status of truth, seeks to finally overreach it, as in "The Dynamic Theory of History". In this regard, he redefines the task of the historian from imposing an order of things, to inferring chaos, specifically the chaos of "excess, rather than deficiency"⁷⁸

IV

The disintegrating space of foundationalist historical endeavour and its refiguring as a theory of force that Adams articulates in the final chapters of The Education of Henry Adams, has major implications for the position of the modern intellectual within the world. As we have seen, Adams becomes a tourist in his own life, out of time and out of tune with the world from which the work emerges. The weakened position of the intellectual is also the weakened position of the Cartesian subject as it is assailed by the lines of force that Adams identifies at the beginning of the twentieth century. John Carlos Rowe considers this question too in his study of Henry Adams and Henry James, Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a Modern Consciousness, noting that "Henry Adams began writing in quest of a far-reaching historical unity, but found himself forced to deal with the philosophical assumptions fundamental to any history ...".⁷⁹ Similarly, in "The Education and the Salvation of History", David Horowitz develops Rowe's thesis and suggests that the self as it appears in The Education of Henry Adams is really just a "...series of errors ... always mistaken, said to fail ... and finally

diminished.”⁸⁰ Nonetheless, Horowitz’s ultimate conclusion rescues unity from the ashes to suggest that “... [it] constitutes human experience; the impulse to unity *is* the phenomenon of history ...”⁸¹ and thus Adams rediscovers unity ... precisely where he loses it, in chaos.”⁸² In this way Horowitz reads the text, in the final analysis, as a reinscription of the possibility of a modern unified self; in effect, form out of chaos.

Horowitz’s discussion of subjectivity in The Education of Henry Adams rests on his analysis of the figure of the “Manikin”, Adams’ famous figure of a “model... on which the toilet of education is to be draped...”⁸³ which is introduced to the reader of the “Preface” and which recurs as a textual marker during the course of the work. Horowitz reads this figure as a “conceit”, a literary device designed to emphasise more fully the separation between “Henry Adams”, the narrator and “Henry Adams” the protagonist of the text.⁸⁴ He elaborates on the distinction between these two textual personae, concluding that the purpose of the manikin is not to appear as a nullity or cipher, but rather to reveal the degree to which “Whatever its actions and responses, the self remains a figure, occupied by the accidents it encounters and the habits that drape it.”⁸⁵ In other words, although Adams puts up the device of the manikin, which at first glance seems to suggest something false or constructed about selfhood, nonetheless, what the manikin actually does is to prove the constancy of the self, even as it is assailed by the effects of modernity.

Horowitz’s argument offers a view of subjectivity in its analysis of the manikin that is difficult to support if the implications of Adams’ radical materialism are applied to the question of selfhood in The Education of Henry Adams. Far from being a device that

props up the construct of the Cartesian self; its ability to apprehend itself as self, the manikin is a far more speculative instrument in the text, working not to reiterate the final unity of history and subjectivity, but rather to further destabilise those already shaky constructs of Western foundational thought. The manikin, in this sense, is an emblem of Heideggerian anti-humanism, which is, as David Levin writes:

... radically decentred, radically unsettling. The ego the *ego cogito* of modern metaphysics, cannot let itself be open to the question of Being without being decentred, cast out, in a kind of exile, into the dimensionality of a wider, more open field. Nor can 'Man' remain standing as the sole measure and ground, in a sense which tolerates false pride, intolerance of indifference, neglect of the ecology of the earth, and totalitarianism.⁸⁶

This kind of analysis, when applied to the manikin figure in The Education of Henry Adams, undermines all claims to subjective agency and any ability to intervene in or impose order on chaotic forces. Thus, the manikin does not assert its will or intelligence on the world, and nor is it in conflict with the world. The manikin has no power to act, but is profoundly and transformingly acted upon and as such, represents human agency as mere drapery against the accelerating forces of technology. The manikin functions as the sea in Moby-Dick, providing a position, and in this case a mouthpiece, from which the aphoristic can be uttered.

Adams' destabilised subject, stripped of agency and reconfigured as the manikin, then, suggests the emergence of a new kind of entity in the world, a kind of mass Heideggerian "anyone self"; undifferentiated from any other, a self-in-crisis. The kind of self that Heidegger talks about in his discussions on the technologised subject, as the "Being-with-one-another":

This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own *Dasein* completely into the kind of being of "the other", in such a way, indeed, that the others, as

distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real [*eigentliche*] dictatorship of the anyone self is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as the *anyone self* [*man*] takes pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as the *anyone self* see and judges; likewise, we shrink back from the great mass as the *anyone self* shrinks back; we find shocking what the *anyone self* finds shocking. The anyone self, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.⁸⁷

Adams' awareness of the coming of a mass society and the emergence of the "anyone self" is strongly felt throughout The Education of Henry Adams. The earliest pages of the text make reference to the opening up of a "new world order", a term which Adams uses throughout the book, a world created from new means of communication and new modes of technology:

He and his eighteenth-century, troglodytic Boston were suddenly cut apart – separated forever – in act if not in sentiment, by the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad; the appearance of the first Cunard steamers in the bay; and the telegraphic messages which carried from Baltimore to Washington the news that Henry Clay and James Polk were nominated for the Presidency. This was in May, 1844; he was six years old; his new world was ready for use, and only fragments of the old met his eyes.⁸⁸

The development of mass culture accelerated radically during the *fin-de-siècle* period, particularly with the rapid development of communication and technology, but also with the emergence of an entertainment industry founded from those tools. Movies, comic strips and sporting spectacles were some examples of this industry, as were World's fairs and expositions which sought to make visible, in a populist and amusing way, the mystery and triumph of national progress. But the rise of mass culture was also the mystery and triumph of material forces and the coming into being of a "non-class", in which the disappearance of any sign of dialectics is clearly evident. Adams' figure of the manikin, along with the *ennui* of the narrative voice in The Education of Henry Adams, suggests an emerging awareness of this new kind of self, the "anyone self", and an

understanding that it is to this version of the subject that attention should turn in the future. For the multiplicity that Adams finds in science is the same multiplicity that now acts on the self as it is positioned in the world, breaking it down, making it amorphous with all of those other disintegrating and disappearing figures of Cartesian selfhood. He predicts the need for a "... new social mind..." to grapple with "... the next great influx of new forces [which seemed to be] near at hand ..." ⁸⁹ which he thinks he can almost see, from his carriage on the "highways of history", "...roaring upward from Broadway and condensed into corporations ... a new man close at hand ..." ⁹⁰ So, it is in the force of the masses, surely itself as multiple and chaotic as physical lines of force, that Adams detects the figuring of the new world order being ushered in at the *fin-de-siècle*, a proposal that subsequent chapters of this study will discuss in more detail.

¹ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, first published in 1907, p382

² Ibid, p380

³ Ibid

⁴ Frisch, "Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment", *American Quarterly* 53.2, 2001, 193-231, retrieved http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_quarterly/v053/53.2frisch.html, Dec 28, 2001

⁵ Yeats, W.B. *Selected Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1974, p29

⁶ Harvey, D. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Social Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p284

⁷ Adams, H. *The Education of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p383

⁸ *Ibid*, p426

⁹ T.S. Eliot, quoted in Harbert, E (ed). *Critical Essays on Henry Adams*. Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1981, p7

¹⁰ Rowe, J.C. (ed). *New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p3

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ See Earl Harbert's "Introduction", pp3-15 and Charles R. Anderson's "Henry Adams, 1838-1918", pp115-139, in Harbert, E. (ed). *Critical Essays on Henry Adams*. Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1981

¹⁴ Bové, P.A. "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence and America", in Lindberg, K.V and Kronick, J.G. *America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996, p39

¹⁵ Miller, P. *The New England Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, p163

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p7

¹⁷ Harlan, D. *The Degradation of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p xviii

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p33

¹⁹ Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p17

²⁰ *Ibid*, p23

²¹ Miller, P. *The New England Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, p7

²² Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p6

²³ *Ibid*, p8

²⁴ As quoted by Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p46

²⁵ *Ibid*, p28

²⁶ *Ibid*, p47

²⁷ *Ibid*, p46

²⁸ Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p195

²⁹ *Ibid*, p194

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p92

³² *Ibid*, p194

³³ Harlan, D. *The Degradation of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p48

³⁴ Bercovitch, S. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p199

³⁵ Miller, P. *The New England Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, p7

³⁶ *Ibid*, p34

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp241-242

³⁸ See Rowe, J.C "Henry Adams's *Education* in the Age of Imperialism", in Rowe, J.C. (ed). *New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp87-114

³⁹ Riddel, J. "Reading America/American Readers", in *Modern Language Notes* 99, September, 1984, pp921-945

⁴⁰ Jay, G. *America the Scrivener: Deconstruction and Subject of Literary History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990

⁴¹ Lesser, W. "Criticism, Literary History and the Paradigm: *The Education of Henry Adams*", in *PMLA* 97, (May, 1982) pp378-394

⁴² Horowitz, D. "The Education and the Salvation of History" in Rowe, J.C. (ed). *New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p117

⁴³ Bové, P. "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America", in Lindberg, K.V and Kronick, J.G. *America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996, p41

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

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- ⁴⁶ Derek Attridge's introduction to "Aphorism Countertime" in Derrida, J. Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p417
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p418
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, p422
- ⁴⁹ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, pxxiv
- ⁵⁰ Derrida, J. Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1996, p421
- ⁵¹ Ibid
- ⁵² Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p3
- ⁵³ Ibid
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, p5
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, p6
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, pp98-109
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, pp110-127
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, pp128-144
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, p114
- ⁶⁰ For the cabin-boy analogy, see Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, pp11-113
- ⁶¹ Derrida, J. Acts of Literature. Attridge, D. (ed). NY: Routledge, 1992, p422
- ⁶² Hegel, G. Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit. Haldane E.S. (trans). NY: Humanities Press, 1968, pp146-147
- ⁶³ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p454
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, p456
- ⁶⁵ Ibid
- ⁶⁶ Bové, P. "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America", in Lindberg, K.V and Kronick, J.G. America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p40
- ⁶⁸ Ibid
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, p42
- ⁷⁰ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p415
- ⁷¹ Bercovitch, S. The American Jeremiad. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p194
- ⁷² Bové, P. "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America", in Lindberg, K.V and Kronick, J.G. America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996, p44
- ⁷³ Shavero, S. Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, p38
- ⁷⁴ Bataille, G. Visions of Excess. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p118
- ⁷⁵ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p382
- ⁷⁶ Bové, P. "Anarchy and Perfection: Henry Adams, Intelligence, and America", in Lindberg, K.V and Kronick, J.G. America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1946 p41
- ⁷⁷ Ibid
- ⁷⁸ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p478
- ⁷⁹ Rowe, J.C. Henry Adams and Henry James: The Emergence of a modern Consciousness. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976, p11
- ⁸⁰ Horowitz, D. "The Education and the Salvation of History" in Rowe, J.C. (ed). New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp122-123
- ⁸¹ Ibid, p138
- ⁸² Ibid, 137
- ⁸³ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, pxxiv
- ⁸⁴ Horowitz, D. "The Education and the Salvation of History" in Rowe, J.C. (ed). New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p120-121
- ⁸⁵ Ibid, p121
- ⁸⁶ Levin, D.M. The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation. New York: Routledge, 1988, p24
- ⁸⁷ Heidegger, M. Being and Time. Stambaugh, J (trans.) New York: Harper and Row, 1972, pp126-127
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⁸⁸ Adams, H. The Education of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946, p5

⁸⁹ Ibid, p498

⁹⁰ Ibid, p499

Transcendence and Transgression: Aphorism in Beat Literature

I

Bop began with jazz one afternoon somewhere on a sidewalk maybe 1939, 1940, Dizzy Gillespie or Charlie Parker or Thelonious Monk was walking down past a men's clothing store on 42nd Street or South Main in L.A. and from the loudspeaker they suddenly heard a wild impossible mistake in jazz that could only have been heard inside their own imaginary head, and that is a new art. Bop. The name derives from an accident, America was named for an Italian explorer and not after an Indian king. Lionel Hampton had made a record called "Hey Baba Ree Bop" and everybody yelled it and it was when Lionel would jump in the audience and whale his saxophone at everybody with sweat, claps, jumping fools in the aisles, the drummer booming and belaboring on his stage as the whole theater rocked..."Skidilibee-la-bee you, -oo, -e bop she bam, ske too ria--Parasakiliaoolza--menooriastibatiolyait -oon ya koo." They came into their own, they jumped, they had jazz and took it in their hands and saw its history vicissitudes and developments and turned it in to their weighty use and heavily carried it clanking like posts across the enormity of a new world philosophy...¹

Jack Kerouac's description of the birth of Bebop foregrounds two key transformations in American jazz during the mid-twentieth century. Firstly, it describes the maverick, form-shattering power that Bebop presented to the commercial machine that jazz had become; and secondly, it shows the way in which Bebop artists turned these developments "to their weighty use" and dragged jazz into the realms of high culture. That same progression is evident in Bebop's literary equivalent, in the writing of Kerouac and in the work of other Beat generation writers. In particular, Kerouac's writing and the work of William Burroughs presents a significant challenge to the ideology and construction of popular forms, while simultaneously employing these popular forms and structures for high literary purposes. This radical experimentation with form, coupled with their wider inquiry into the nature of American identity at the midpoint of the twentieth century, clearly places Kerouac and Burroughs' work within the aphoristic trajectory of American culture traced by this study. In fact, Kerouac's description of the birth of Bebop bears all

the hallmarks of aphorism itself, with its focus on the “wild impossible mistake” and its insistence that, along with America, “the name [Bebop] derives from an accident”.

The connections between aphorism and the structure and method of Bebop are also numerous and striking. Just as Derrida emphasises the asynchronous nature of language processes in “Aphorism Countertime,” so too is syncopated time a primary identifying factor in jazz. In Beat writing, a sense of fractured rhythm and time infuses many of the key texts. Being “in time” or “out of time” or having the ability to “know time”, as Dean Moriarty speaks of so often in On the Road, are important indicators not only of the sense of dislocation expressed in these works about the modern world, but also of the radical modes of representation and subjectivity forced into being in Beat writing. Like the Derridean field of *contretemps*, or the stressed second and fourth beat in a Bebop tune, the emphasis on being either within or outside time, or more speculatively, to be able to transcend time and so know time, is indicative of a changing conception of identity and representation during the 1950s.

This chapter looks at several key Beat texts: On the Road, Dharma Bums and Dr. Sax by Jack Kerouac, and Naked Lunch by William Burroughs. In divergent ways, these works bring into focus some of the primary concerns specific to the mid-twentieth century American context, intersecting, and in some cases, extenuating the issues at stake in the wider ground of anti-foundational thought. In particular, they problematise the traditionally privileged position of the Cartesian subject, contemplating its fate under the changing conditions of modernity. Structurally, these texts are experimental and speculative. They reflect an on-going dissolution of generic and aesthetic boundaries,

and most importantly, exhibit new and radical representational strategies that emerged specifically from the popular cultural forms and structures of the time.

In particular, this chapter considers the status of the Modern subject within the context of popular space as it began to emerge during the 1950s, examining the implications for Western notions of reason and subjectivity. Within this argument, Kerouac and Burroughs are poles marking out the ends of the Beat continuum. Kerouac, with his interests in Eastern philosophy, particularly Zen Buddhism, represents one strain of the Beat tradition that can be defined as transcendental, while Burroughs' work can be considered, by contrast, transgressive. Both writers engage with the popular and the philosophical in the style that Kerouac describes in his analysis of the birth of Bebop: like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonious Monk, Kerouac and Burroughs bear the burden of making something usable out of the past in order to confront the "...enormity of a new world philosophy ...".

The American postwar context from which Beat literature emerged is classically characterised as a time of simultaneous paranoia and prosperity. On one hand, America was in a mood of high anxiety due to the pervasive conditions of the Cold War, yet, on the other hand, it was giddy with the wealth generated by a booming consumer-driven economy. At this time, accelerating modes of industry continued to transform the social and cultural conditions of America. A housing boom founded on the development of low cost suburbs around city hinterlands, along with the increasing availability of consumer goods, low unemployment, publicly funded infrastructural projects and an unprecedented range and complexity of technological advances, created substantial economic growth

and social change. Added to this, the media, specifically television, had a key modifying role in the transformation of American society and culture, and during the late 1940s and early 1950s numerous TV shows were produced that would fashion the contours of popular cultural topography up until the present day. The political landscape of 1950s America was defined dialectically against the Iron Curtain and Cold War, driven by containment policies and oiled by the rhetoric of “either for us or against us”. To this end, America’s involvement in world affairs increased dramatically and, along with that increase, there was an enormous build up of military capability and international deployment. On mainland America, Cold War ideology fed through to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUAA) and Joseph McCarthy’s anti-Communist witch hunts which had their nadir in the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for alleged espionage in 1953

In American art and writing during the 1950s some or all of the contradictions and tensions between paranoia and prosperity are evident. The key aesthetic forms of the 1950s: Abstract Expressionism, Bebop, and Beat writing express both a sense of urban excitement as well as a pervading anxiety that is evident within the social and political contexts of the time. The fifties saw the rise and triumph of Freudian psychoanalysis in intellectual as well as in bourgeois American contexts, and with it the beginnings of America’s therapeutic society. Philip Reiff, in his classic biography of Freud, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist, considers America’s submission to Freudian theory at this time to be a direct consequence of the favourable comparison Freud draws between American culture and Communism in his Civilization and its Discontents:

Psychoanalysis has been received most congenially in America since the discrediting of political radicalism, for psychoanalysis sees the revolutionary

simply as a special type of neurotic who displaces his aggressions onto the public level. Freud offers a brilliant formula with which to shrink the revolutionary character - as basically in revolt against his father. Revolutionary ideologies - left and right - may be treated as rationales for Oedipal conflicts.²

Thus, the pathology of the neurotic allows all challenges to normality, positioned as “American” obviously, to be quashed by this totalising interpretation of the Oedipal paradigm. Clearly, such a configuration of normality had a certain appeal to American conservative interests and so became a sanctioned mode of treatment for those people seen to fall outside this mode of “American” normality.

The sanctioned modes of normality during the 1950s, however, were for some Americans, mental straitjackets and intellectual manacles. In this sense, Beat literature is seen by most critics as a reaction against the kinds of social, political and economic conditions of the period, expressing the void at the centre of an America that lacked authenticity, had been captured by culture and political conservatives, and sidetracked by military thugs both at home and abroad. At the same time, however, it is difficult to overlook the appeal to American traditions and history in the work of a writer like Jack Kerouac, who echoes many of the sentiments also found in the writing of the Transcendentalists, particularly that of Walt Whitman. As scathing as it is about the supersonic America of tail-finned cars and bobby-socks, the work of the Beats expresses an intense connection to American ways of seeing and being, a condition described by Daniel Bell in The End of Ideology:

[O]ne finds, at the end of the fifties, a disconcerting caesura. In the West, among the intellectuals, the old passions are spent. The new generation, with no meaningful memory of these old debates, and no secure tradition to build upon, finds itself seeking new purposes within a framework of political society that has rejected, intellectually speaking, the old apocalyptic and chiliastic

visions. In the search for a "cause," there is a deep, desperate, almost pathetic anger[T]he problem is that the old politico-economic radicalism (pre-occupied with such matters as the socialization of industry) has lost its meaning, while the stultifying aspects of contemporary culture (e.g., television) cannot be redressed in political terms. At the same time, American culture has almost completely accepted the avant-garde, particularly in art, and the older academic styles have been driven out completely.

The young intellectual is unhappy because the "middle way" is for the middle-aged, not for him; it is without passion and is deadening. Ideology, which by its nature is an all-or-none affair, and temperamentally the thing he wants, is intellectually devitalized, and few issues can be formulated any more, intellectually, in ideological terms.³

Bell's depiction of the intellectual dilemmas of the 1950s and the subsequent devitalisation of American arts and letters during this time is certainly evident in the work of Kerouac and Burroughs. However, Beat writing is more than simply the declaration of "pathetic anger," the only form of dissent that Bell sees available for young intellectuals or artists of the 1950s. It also exposes and details a syncopation in the rhythm of American life and letters in a way that exceeds the limitations that naïve expressionism permits. In its interrogation of modernity through the language and structures of popular cultural forms, Beat writing confronts the conditions of postwar America with a startling reconsideration of space and subjectivity that continues to impinge upon our own sense of being and the expression of that being at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Beat writing, with its simultaneous engagement with and dislocation from foundational American thought, results in a literature that seems shredded and disparate and that is genealogically aphoristic. In its account of the new cultural spaces opened up when boundaries between high and low culture began to dissolve, and in its examination of subjectivity following that dissolution, Beat literature is worthy of a closer analysis than that provided within the critical project that generally accompanies it. Indeed, a cursory

look this criticism reveals not so much a “project” as a “product”, in which gossip essays indulging in descriptions of Kerouac’s looks, drinking habits and sexual exploits suffice for serious analysis. Burroughs’ work suffers a similar fate, in that much of the material that claims to deal with his writing does so only after it has thoroughly aired the marginally relevant variety of information within which it is now embedded. The critical response to Beat literature rarely manages to escape the hermeneutical snare of reading life as art, or vice versa, and seems singularly unwilling to engage with the structural or formal methods at play within the works, or to consider their ontological propositions beyond those factors which relate to the creation of cultural artefacts. Kerouac and Burroughs are, more often than not, viewed as key exhibits in the funhouse of counterculture; quaint or cute in their anxieties about the suburbanised world of fifties America, yet unconnected to anything more metaphysical or political than that.

This is particularly true of critical approaches to Kerouac’s work. From the earliest receptions of On the Road, up until criticism formulated in very recent years, analysis of Kerouac’s writing seems inseparable from analysis of his life and times. Most commentators read his work as thinly disguised autobiography, and even those who do write from a more complex position continue to read Kerouac’s writing through this lens. In recent years William Burroughs’ work has fared better in the critical field. However, when Naked Lunch was first published, itself a Byzantine tale of censorship and accident,⁴ it was received with a great degree of confusion and debate. Critics who did attempt to engage with the text complained of its obscurity and experimentalism, claiming to be bored or confounded by its unreadability and resistance to regular narrative strategy. In one example of this approach, David Lodge argues that,

notwithstanding its sordid subject matter, the work is simply boring and that "... what most makes for boredom in this novel is its technical experiment..."⁵, while R. G. Peterson notes that "... Naked Lunch could hardly be more obscure than it seems."⁶ Other critics, by contrast, have gone out of their way to read traditional continuity and narrative into the work. This is exemplified in William Shull's essay "The Quest and the Questions: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William Burroughs, 1953-1960" where the *leitmotif* of the Quest is applied to the Lee sections of the novel as a means of forging a traditional reading of the work.⁷

On the other hand, some critics have engaged with Naked Lunch precisely on the point where these previously noted commentators have found it so lacking, namely its experimental nature and its resistance to traditional narrative strategies. Mary McCarthy compares the text to a carnival or a circus in her essay "Burroughs' Naked Lunch",⁸ while Tony Tanner in City of Words describes it as "... a book with no narrative continuity, and with no sustained point of view; the separate incidents are not interrelated, they co-exist in a particular field of force."⁹ Recent poststructuralist critics have come to similar conclusions and have employed similar metaphors of the carnival or the force-field in their analyses of Naked Lunch. For example, Carl Malmgren compares the experience of reading the book to being in the audience at a strange performance: "The reader has an arena before him or her – the fabulous Interzone – but he or she has no idea what kinds of acts will appear, who will perform, or how long the act will last."¹⁰ Later on in this discussion he echoes Tanner's conception of a force-field to argue that

... Burroughs presents the reader with a fiction whose actants possess neither duration, identity or personality; whose topoi are neither recognizable nor contiguous; whose story violates expectations of movement, irreversibility and

teleology; whose speaker is not singular; and whose mode of discourse is not uniform.¹¹

This is an accurate analysis of the “lines of force” working on the later Modern subject, and is indicative too of the genealogical connections between Burroughs’ work and that of Henry Adams, where the nature and modality of modernity is described in just these terms.

A further notable exception to the prevalent biographical nature of Beat criticism is Daniel Belgrad’s recent study The Culture of Spontaneity. Here Belgrad argues that the defining trait of postwar art and writing practice is the strategy of spontaneity. He suggests that: “Spontaneity’s challenge to the existing order was founded on a belief in the value of the unconscious mind as the locus of possibilities denied legitimacy within the prevailing ideology.”¹² The resulting art of spontaneity is considered by Belgrad to be a “sign of its time”; a means by which the hegemonic orthodoxies of corporate liberalism could be challenged from outside their margins. Spontaneity was a way in which which artists could access the forces of the unconscious and communicate them back to their audiences. Belgrad sees Beat writing, Bebop jazz and Abstract Expressionism as a “...radical “field” ...an entering into improvisation with one’s materials ... a “plastic dialogue.” ”¹³

Considering Beat literature from the point of view of force, as in the work of Tanner and Malmgren, or as a dialogue between artist and the unconscious, as in Belgrad’s argument, is a valuable approach to this body of writing which has tended to suffer from an over-emphasis on biography and gossip. However, this idea of force also connects the Beats to

a wider and more interesting transformation of being and representation evident in American thought and writing since Melville. The idea that the Beats had unmediated access to the unconscious and could translate this realm into language for their readers, while interesting and fruitful in some respects, ultimately continues to promulgate a romantic view of Beat writers and Beat texts, even though it finds a more appropriate set of methods and metaphors to describe the process. This chapter proposes a different viewpoint: that the importance of the Beats and their work was more significant than many critics have acknowledged because it represents the earliest and most speculative attempts at transforming literature, culture and being itself into an entirely new configuration defined by its connection to popular space.

III

The period 1850 and 1950 represents a time of exponential change in the culture and habits of Americans. Part of the nature of this change was due to the so-called “rise of the masses”, which can be traced alongside the development of an industrialising and urbanising society. By the 1950s, the key modes of production were almost entirely based on industry, effectively creating a new class: the “leisured masses”. One of the most obvious changes brought about by this coming of mass society was the dissolution of boundaries between high and low modes of cultural production. Indeed, in current theoretical thought, this dissolution is seen as an essential distinction between the conditions of modernity and those of postmodernity. Fredric Jameson advances this argument in his influential essay “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”¹⁴ and it has been taken up by many others since then. Jameson’s discussion is, in fact, one strand in a wider conversation that has circulated around the relationship between mass culture and cultural hegemony in various Marxist and neo-Marxist forums

since the postwar period. During the late 1950s, Adorno, for example, identified this shift away from distinct high and low cultural categories as a new way of maintaining social control over the potential revolutionary forces of the masses:

Culture industry is the purposeful manipulation of its consumers from above. It also forces a reconciliation of high and low art, which have been separated for thousands of years, a reconciliation which damages both. High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed, low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total.¹⁵

The kinds of conditions which would eventuate in the disintegration of the central divide between high and low culture, however, were only starting to emerge during the early 1950s when Kerouac, Burroughs and other Beat artists were working. Nonetheless, their writing suggests an immersion in popular culture that goes beyond the context of fiction and actually crossed into ontological modes and paradigms themselves. Just as Kerouac described Bebop artists' ability to "...turn it [jazz] to their weighty use and heavily carr[y] it clanking like posts across the enormity of a new world philosophy..."¹⁶ so too does Beat writing explore the space opened up between the collapsing boundaries of high and low culture as a site for experimentation into received modes of representation and subjectivity. Within this emerging space both high and low modalities are pushed out of their usual rhythms and into the syncopations of countertime and aphorism.

In photographer Robert Frank's 1958 collection The Americans¹⁷ the nature and significance of this new zone for representation is examined in close-up detail. Kerouac wrote the introduction to this collection, exploring within his essay the connections between Frank's photographic eye and that of the Beat sensibility:

That crazy feeling in America where the sun is hot on the streets and the music comes out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral, that's what Robert Frank has captured in tremendous photographs taken as he travelled on the road around practically forty-eight states in an old used car (on a Guggenheim Scholarship) and with the agility, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow, photographed scenes that have never before been seen on film.¹⁸

Kerouac locates Frank's work "on the road" of 1950s America and certainly firmly within the Beat paradigm. More importantly though, he also notes that in its examination of popular space - the everyday scenes of 1950s America - Frank's work is able to represent what has "...never been seen before on film...."¹⁹ Apart from his well-documented links with Kerouac and the other Beats,²⁰ the nature of Frank's photography crystallises something essential in the technique and paradigms of Beat writing, a process which George Cotkin's isolates as the "existential imperative" shared by Frank and the Beats.²¹ Cotkin claims, "If Frank was the Beat photographer in style, then as Jack Kerouac well understood, his images reflected and codified the Beat-hipster ideal..."²² This ideal, he argues, is embodied within the:

...espousal of new cultural heroes, individuals outside of the society whether through personal rebellion, or by social and racial circumstance: the jazz musician, hobo, black, criminal, insane person or dope addict. To be alienated, apart from social conventions and expectations, was to be set free, free to take to the road or to become part of the urban nether-world.²³

The suggestion that the Beats had some sort of unmediated access to a new and alternative social space is a commonly held one, further delineated in Belgrad's treatment of the Beats in The Culture of Spontaneity. However, this mock-up of the Beat ideal supports two overlapping misconceptions about the significance of their work as a whole. The first of these sees no distinction between the experience of the popular and its representation, effacing the division between the experienced and the textual that the click of the camera shutter or the clack of the typewriter enforce. Despite any supposed or

actual “existential imperative”, Robert Frank and the Beats were actually constructing the popular as textual space. Any notion of the “actual popular” becomes, for our purposes, like Lacan’s notion of the Real, an encounter forever missed.²⁴

The second misconception about the Beats and popular culture, which in some ways bisects the first, centres on the extent to which Beat writers were actually transcribing already codified popular culture forms, the comic strip or the movie, for example, into literature and, in Frank’s case, visual art. Cotkin offers an unwitting example of this misconception when he claims that: “Kerouac maintained that this in-motion attitude and style has made Frank shadow-like and at times invisible to his photographic subjects.”²⁵ Cotkin sees Frank’s “on the road” style as evidence of his Beatnik spirit. He fails to consider any further resonances in Kerouac’s intriguing analogy to *The Shadow* of popular fiction here.

Kerouac’s most devoutly “pop” novel, Dr. Sax, constantly alludes to the comic book hero, *The Shadow*, otherwise known as Lamont Cranston, star of many 1940’s and 1950’s pulp novels, comics, radio serials and movies. Kerouac’s references to *The Shadow* in his introduction to Robert Frank’s work foreground Frank’s fascination with popular culture referents, a factor which can also be observed in the focus we find in The Americans on “behind-the-scenes” or “in-process” images of popular culture. Pictures of jukeboxes, televisions and drive-ins proliferate throughout the collection, along with others images depicting television shows being made. These photographs bring the process of construction into focus, revealing in startlingly innovative ways the mechanics behind the mediated image. The photographs entitled “Television Studio – Burbank,

California”²⁶ and “Drive-In Movie, Detroit”²⁷, for example, detail the beginnings of a simulated society, zooming in on the fabricated nature of this culture, and establishing what would later become central elements of postmodern art theory and practice.

The representation of a constructed popular space and the inclusion of existing popular cultural forms in high culture art works are, as we see in Frank’s work, important features of the Beat aesthetic. While the early novels of Kerouac and Burroughs display an erudition that extends far beyond the popular *gestalt* we now associate with their writing, it is not their debt to Proust, Balzac, Sade or Basho that defines the Beats as a literary movement. Rather it is their textualisation of life on the road: of jazz bars, jumping freight trains, benzedrine, “tea” and heroin, that is generally recalled when considering their place in the history of American literature. This textualisation of the popular soon lacked all resemblance to those higher level interests of the original Beats, a point which is evidenced by the fifty or so “Beatsploitation” books or films which appeared during the later 1950s.

To theorise this further it is useful to turn to Dick Hebdige’s semiotic analysis of popular culture, Subculture: The Meaning of Style. Hebdige’s analysis of the meaning of style begins with a short essay about a jar of vaseline which appears in Jean Genet’s The Thief’s Journal of 1967.²⁸ This object provides an important introduction to the two strands of analysis that Hebdige pursues in his study. The first, which examines how subcultures appropriate common objects and reinvest them with specific meanings, might be called the semiotic axis. The other, which aims to illustrate the distinctive cultural and socio-economic context in which a subculture develops (in Genet’s case, being

homosexual in a heterosexual society), can be labelled the axis of ideology. According to Hebdige, the meaning of subcultural style can be found at the intersection of these two lines of inquiry. Hebdige prefaces his discussion of ideology with a brief survey of some of the term's greatest theorists: E.P. Thompson, Althusser and Gramsci. He then places subcultural style in a specific relationship to ideology. If ideology is the silent yet pervasive guardian of cultural hegemony, then subcultural style represents an oblique form of cultural dissent; a form of cultural subversion.²⁹ He argues that subcultural style is perceived as offensive by the silent majority because it represents an implicit ideological challenge to social cohesion. Hebdige also claims that the major impetus of post-war subcultures has been the proximity of white working class youth to an urban Black community which offers the possibility of an alternative culture. This line of argument seems particularly appropriate for the homogenised and homogenising white culture of 1950s America. Certainly, there are many references in Kerouac's novels to the oppressive nature of middle-class society, and many passages which celebrate Black music and culture in all its forms. However, to speculate on the motivation for these passages in an attempt to gain further access to Beat subculture would only take us further way from its textual representation. Quite apart from the remnants of ideology, what these texts do is to offer the "bits and pieces" of the subculture's style.

For Hebdige, it is these bits and pieces, the objects like vaseline jars, which allow a subculture to signify. In the opening pages of Subculture: The Meaning of Style he claims to be interested in "... the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as style in subculture."³⁰ And as we find out, the way in which a subculture creates meaning through objects is by playing upon the distinction between legitimate and

illegitimate use. Hebdige argues that it is possible for subcultures to express an oblique form of resistance by subverting the legitimate use of everyday objects:

By repositioning and recontextualising commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives lie to what Althusser has called the “false consciousness of everyday practice” (Althusser and Balibar, 1968) and opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings.³¹

In codifying this practice Hebdige borrows Claude Levi-Strauss’ notion of “*bricolage*”, maintaining that subcultures construct their worlds out of the system of concrete objects, rather than from any abstract matrix of set beliefs. These objects: the mod’s scooter, the punk’s safety pins, the beatnik’s beret, allow the subcultural participant to “think their world”.³² In the broader context of this discussion, they are also the materials by which Kerouac and Burroughs construct their textual worlds and make them “mean”.

Kerouac’s and Burroughs’ early works, particularly On the Road and Junky, offer examples of this codifying process. In general, both texts confirm Hebdige’s claim that the semiotics of subculture operate through the illegitimate repositioning of cultural objects. Even the title of Kerouac’s novel displays this logic. For Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, cars, freight trains and the road and rail systems themselves, offer illegitimate escape routes out of the stifling routines of middle-class white existence. While in Burroughs’ Junky, a similar impulse to escape is satisfied, not by the open road, but by the main-line: the illegitimate use of prescribed drugs. In the prologue to Junky the narrator claims that he grew up with “...all the props of a safe, comfortable way of life ...”³³, but later says that he became an addict because he “...did not have strong motivations in any direction, Junk won by default.”³⁴ In both novels the subculture is defined through its repositioning and illegitimate use of cultural objects. However, in

doing so, these early representations of Beat subculture set in motion a further layer of cultural appropriation, in this case in the reverse direction, for as Barry Alfonso maintains, “...the Beat generation became a media symbol for a litany of sins: laziness, obscenity, drug abuse, perversion, smelly feet.”³⁵ Soon Dean Moriarty, the Beatnik icon from On the Road would have to compete for space in the popular imagination with Maynard G. Krebs, the fictional Beatnik played by Bob Denver in Dobie Gillis, a competition which was won by Denver, who was often referred to as the world’s best known Beatnik before later finding fame as the star of Gilligan’s Island³⁶

In their early works Burroughs and Kerouac lured the Beat subculture out of the jazz bars and into the supplementary field of the written text, at the same time creating new ontologies within American fiction. As well as representing subculture, however, they also explored and employed subcultural modalities in their work, a process which involved the induction of new, visually-dominant media into the space of the written text. These popular forms carry with them their own structural codes and ontological parameters, which, when reconfigured in Beat writing, led to new ways of thinking about representation and new modes of making meaning. This was not always an hygienic transfer, as, along with the shifting signifiers of popular culture itself, it involved a degree of permutation, inversion and subversion. This is clearly the case in the use that both Kerouac and Burroughs make of the popular forms of comic strips and film.

Any consideration of the comic strip form in high art cannot proceed without reference to the Pop Art movement, particularly the work of Roy Lichtenstein who transports this popular form into the gallery space in his seminal works of the early 1960s. Lichtenstein

offers a parallel in visual art for a similar transfer from low art to high culture in Beat fiction. Far from being a naïve recontextualisation of pop signifying processes, Lichtenstein's work, particularly "I Can See the Whole Room and There's Nobody In It" (1961), offers a peep-hole into the world of the comic strip. The frames within the frame reveal a world with its own semiotic codes, a world entirely independent of the three-dimensional world outside it. Ahead of Lichtenstein, however, Kerouac and Burroughs also used the comic strip and its codes for just such purposes in their own work. In "The Way Toward a Visual Culture", Alphons Silberman points out that comics were one of the first mass cultural forms that developed semiotic, narrative and paradigmatic structures independent of traditional literary forms.³⁷ In transposing these forms into their fiction, Kerouac and Burroughs were enacting a particularly aphoristic textual practice: aphoristic, not only because they were using the formal devices of popular culture, but also because they were mixing visual and textual media in a way which displaces the generally held conventions of both. In this sense, Kerouac and Burroughs fragment the codes which make orthodox reading possible and, in accordance with Derrida's definition of the aphorism, disrupt both narrative structures and generic boundaries in the process.

In general, the comic strip can be distinguished from other narrative forms by a few simple, yet crucial structural conventions. These include the basic unit of the frame, which offers a point of view similar to that of the camera angle in a film; the signature application of colour, which although internally consistent, often has no mimetic correspondence to the world; the extensive use of onomatopoeia and symbols which denote sound and movement; and the employment of variable typefaces or fonts to indicate volume, intensity and emphasis. Also, and perhaps more obviously, comics

make use of thought and speech bubbles and contextual text on the perimetre of the frames. Both Kerouac and Burroughs employ many of these elements in their work, sometimes simply to assist in description, but in other places to indicate more extensive ontological shifts. Kerouac, especially, is noteworthy for his use of comic strip conventions which worked to destabilise and fragment traditional literary devices, as well as foundational assumptions about the nature of “character” itself.

Kerouac’s 1959 novel Dr. Sax is particularly significant for its use of a diverse range of popular culture forms. These forms are put to work throughout the book in both structural and thematic ways. The novel opens with a dream scene that transports the reader back to the narrator’s childhood in the small town of Lowell, Massachusetts. The fluidity of the text is established in the opening sequence, which expands and contracts between the ordinary small town social space and the fantastic space inhabited by the character of Dr. Sax. Early in the book, Dr. Sax is imbued with the quasi-mythical aura of a comic strip superhero. He seems to be constructed out of bits and pieces of North American popular culture, as well as from the fragments of South American mythology that are referred to throughout. Sax’s comic strip origin is underlined almost immediately with the first of many references to The Shadow, a figure who seems to haunt Kerouac’s texts:

When I was a little boy the only occasion I happened to make a connection between Doctor Sax and a river (therefore establishing his identity) was when The Shadow in one of his Lamont Cranston masterpieces published by Street and Smith visited the shores of the Mississippi... Doctor Sax was like The Shadow when I was young ...³⁸

To further illustrate this connection, Kerouac makes use of some of the comic-strip semiotics already outlined, dividing his text into frame-like sequences which include onomatopoeic text among other devices:

I was amazed that The Shadow should travel so much, he had such an easy time potting racketeers in New York Chinatown Waterfront with his blue .45 (glint) (roar of The Shadow's Speech in Lead) (toppling forms of tight coat Chinese gangsters) (falling Tong Wars from the Gong) (The Shadow disappears through Fu Manchu's house and comes out in back of Boston Blackie, whaling with his .45)³⁹

As well as using the codes of comic strips in this way, Kerouac also employs the form's generic narrative and paradigmatic structures, some of which are highlighted by Leslie Fiedler in his 1955 article, "The Middle Against Both Ends".⁴⁰ Fiedler claims that the superhero comic represents one of the higher or final forms of popular culture. He bases this claim on, among other things, the form's popularity, and the fact that it develops and incorporates new mythical material into its narratives. He also sees comic books in general as the "...inheritors ... of the inner impulses of traditional folk art..."⁴¹ and explains that the elements of the superhero comic generally include: "... the urban setting, the threatened universal catastrophe, the hero who never uses arms, who returns to weakness and obscurity, who is impotent ...".⁴² Similarly, in his study entitled Comics, Ideology, Power and the Critics, Martin Barker attests to the formulaic nature of comics.⁴³

Given this, however, these forms rarely remain undisturbed even within their generic boundaries, let alone when they are transferred into other media. In his analysis of the popular permutations of the Batman image, Jim Collins refers to this process as "reconfiguration". A process that moves: "... across genres, mixing different forms of discourse as well as different media, which by extension alters traditional modes of

circulation...".⁴⁴ Later, when describing the dark and intense popular reconfigurations of the comic genre during the 1980s, Collins claims that:

In their frustration of the homogeneity and predicability considered the prerequisite for "genericity", these hybrid popular narratives could be considered "post-generic" insofar as they resist syntactical stabilisation, but are still composed of what, at this point, must be considered generic artefacts.⁴⁵

Long before the eighties though, Kerouac and Burroughs were already practising a form of generic reconfiguration. Ostensibly, Kerouac's character of Sax conforms to Fiedler's definition of the superhero genre: he tries to save the town from impending disaster without the use of weapons, he keeps his identity secret, and he even makes use of Shadow-like accessories such as suction cups.⁴⁶ Yet Kerouac also alters the superhero form by playing with its generic syntax. Sax is no regular sanitised fifties superhero in the tradition of Superman; he is often coarse and rude, involved in the world of magic, and occasionally acts as a kind of textual shaman. Significantly too, Sax is associated with Eastern religion and we learn that he has been trained by the "Hero Monks of the World North".⁴⁷ Accordingly his ethical position in the novel is complicated and unclear. While at times he works to protect the young narrator superhero-style, at other times his aim is to be the destroyer of the sedate urban world. His apocalyptic tendencies are cyclical rather than destructive, and so throughout the text Sax is feared by the representatives of both good and evil. Like the comic book character that he is, he defies key boundaries, such as right and wrong, while exploring them for all of their limitations. In this sense he can be likened to Nietzsche's "overman". However, Sax is ultimately a fallible figure, a point reflected in the climactic scene of the novel when he releases his

supposedly salvation-bringing potion into the snake pit in an effort to destroy “the great snake of the world”, and then reflects:

The herb didn't work ... nothing works in the end, you just - there's just absolutely nothing - nobody cares what happens to you, the universe doesn't care what happens to mankind ... Well, we'll let it go at that, there's nothing we can do about it. [And later, the danger having been averted] ... And Doctor Sax, standing there with his hands in his pockets, his mouth open, uptilted his searching profile into the enigmatic sky made a fool of – “I'll be damned”, he said with amazement. “The Universe disposes of its own evil!”⁴⁸

In Dr Sax Kerouac takes the superhero genre, and one of its contemporary manifestations, The Shadow, and reconfigures them in a new textual space. In the process of drawing these popular forms into the text, he opens up new possibilities for representation within literature and also challenges the boundaries between high and low culture. Here, both of these modalities are disturbed and transformed by the infusion of one with the other.

Apart from the use of the comic strip form in Kerouac's work, there is also extensive use of the cinematic. The blending of cinematic forms into literary texts is now a common element in postmodern fiction and is evident in a range of contemporary novelists' practices. Alec McHoul and David Wills have examined the relationship between film techniques and the fiction of Thomas Pynchon in their study Writing Pynchon, noting of Gravity's Rainbow that:

... the text in places makes direct references to filmic texts, actors, scenes and so on while, in others, it appears to use the very techniques of the cinema itself without such mention, relying on as it does on slapstick, camera shots and angles, frames and so on. The first case is clearly a mention of the cinematic and the second is closer to being a use. However, the two often blur into one another to the point where use and mention become materially identical.⁴⁹

McHoul and Will's differentiation between “use” and “mention” provide two distinct approaches to the intertextual space of explicitly post-cinematic texts. Within such works

both writing and film are reconfigured, transforming their accepted modes by considering those elements traditionally out of their generic bounds, in the same way that Derrida describes the function of aphorism. To use McHoul and Will's terms again, "mention" of the cinematic in the work of Kerouac and Burroughs denotes references to the medium's paradigms and artefacts, while on the other hand, "use" refers to the transference of the cinema's internal structures into the textual arena. Examples of both of these modes are apparent in Kerouac's and Burroughs' work; however, it is when the distinction between use and mention breaks down that a more uniquely aphoristic moment occurs. McHoul and Wills have pointed to such "metarepresentational" moments in Gravity Rainbow⁵⁰ yet, even in the early work of Kerouac and Burroughs, the distinction between these categories begins to blur. Consequently, it is possible to trace a movement within the work of Kerouac and Burroughs from the use of cinematic intertexts, to the creation of a metarepresentational textual space inhabited by new types of textual subjectivities.

Kerouac refers to cinematic artefacts in his work for a number of reasons. Firstly, such "mentions" offer the reader a visual stimulus in the process of making characters concrete: "Doctor Sax was like The Shadow when I was young, I saw him leap over the last bush on the sandbank one night, cape a-flying..."⁵¹ As well as providing the reader with visual cues, however, mention of The Shadow also situates Sax within a popular narrative, and gestures toward his possible motives and position in the text. This position, however, is often destabilised by subsequent cinematic references which add to the complexity of Sax's character. In Chapter Four, Book Six, Dr Sax wears a W.C. Fields mask, and throughout much of the text he displays a sense of humour appropriate to that disguise.⁵² In Burroughs' Naked Lunch cinematic mention is less explicit, yet can

still be seen as a means of solidifying the nature of characters and scenes. In the chapter “Ordinary Men and Women”, Dr. Benway, after describing the final degradation of a “thing-like” character, reflects: “That’s the sex that passes the censor, squeezes between the bureaus, because there’s always a space between, in popular songs and Grade-B movies ...”.⁵³ As well as making a general comment about the transgressive nature of popular culture, the Grade B reference contextualises the story that has just passed, “the man who taught his ass to talk”, as belonging to the B-grade movie genre in both a visual and a narrative sense.

As well as “mentioning” the cinematic though, these texts also make structural use of filmic devices. In “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose”, Kerouac refers to what he sees as the essential American literary mode as a “bookmovie”: “...the movie in words, the visual American form.”⁵⁴ And in Dr. Sax Kerouac includes a number of scenes which employ the techniques of script and screenplay in just such a “bookmovie” hybrid. These sections of the text cannot be read as film scripts in any straightforward sense due to the fact that much of the information they provide exceeds the boundaries of film. Instead, Kerouac plays with the form of the screenplay, especially with the technique of breaking the text up into discrete sensory perspectives:

SCENE: A masked by night shadow flitting over the edge of the sandbank.

SOUND: A dog barking half a mile away; and river.

SMELL: Sweet sand dew.

TEMPERATURE: Summer midnight frost.

MONTH: Late August, ballgames over, no more homeruns over the centre of the arcanum of sand our circus, our diamond in the sand, where ballgames took place in the reddy dusk, now it’s going to be the flight of the caw-caw bird of Autumn, honking to his skinny grave in the Alabama pines.

SUPPOSITION: Doctor Sax has just disappeared over the sandbanks gone home to bed.⁵⁵

Here Kerouac employs what are essentially multimedia techniques to present a compartmentalised quasi-filmic text, while deliberately failing to distinguish those senses and suppositions that film can represent from those that it cannot. In itself, this is a highly aphoristic writing strategy, and combined with the foregrounded visual lexicon, even more so. A more explicit use of cinematic devices, however, occurs in chapter two, entitled “Gloomy Bookmovie”. Its sixteen pages are divided into twenty-five scenes, many of which are accompanied by suggested camera angles and other categorically filmic devices:

... the brown painting on the wall depicting angels playing around a brown Virgin Mary and Child in a Brown eternity of Brown Saints - Scene 3 with the cherubs (look closeup) all gloomy Scene 7- Along the splashing puddles of grassyard, at worm level, that fallen branch looks enormous and demented on its arms in the hail ... Scene 11 - Thunder again, now you see my room, my bedroom with the green desk, bed and chair ... ⁵⁶

In Naked Lunch, Burroughs also makes use of various cinematic devices. The novel’s opening scenes and the narrative voice which creates them are a variation of the film noir genre: “I can feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves ...”.⁵⁷

Burroughs’ “cut up” technique can also be likened to the cinematic technique of montage, in which distinct elements or scenes are cut up and reconstituted to create a new whole, except for the fact that Burroughs’ method displays an aggressive disposition against any kind of significant synthesis.

As innovative as the scenes mentioned here seem, Dr. Sax and Naked Lunch provide their most concentrated examinations of the process of representation when the distinctions between use and mention break down altogether; when the lines of reference cease to be

between a master code: cinema and its artefacts and techniques, and a subset of that code: cinematic fiction. In Revolution in Poetic Language, Julia Kristeva claims that when the codes of one signifying practice are transferred into another, a change in both signifier and signified occurs. This, she argues, is the proper realm of the intertextual, a site which denotes the complexities of such a transfer rather than being a simple study of sources.⁵⁸ Such a process of transposition requires the destruction of one subject position and the construction of new ones. In this way transposition is implicated in the ontological instability within the text and at the point of its reception, requiring readers and characters in self-reflexive fiction such as Dr. Sax or Naked Lunch, to shift from one subject, or in Kristeva's terms, thetic position to another.

In Dr. Sax, these thetic shifts occur when characters are explicitly transposed from a cinematic signifying system into a textual one, such as we see in the case of Count Condu and the inhabitants of Snake castle. Ostensibly, they occupy a serious position in the narrative as Dr. Sax's enemies. However, the fact that they are drawn using the codes of B-grade horror movies destabilises their status as narrative voice, and consequently the reader becomes aware of their doubly fictional nature. Burroughs' manipulation of transposition produces a correspondingly disorientating effect in Naked Lunch. Through the character of Dr. Benway, Burroughs transfers the mad scientist of the B-grade comic film or comic strip into the serious codes of medical and psychiatric discourse, and in the city of Interzone all state and military power is in the hands of this deranged doctor. The result is at once comic and horrific. Burroughs first introduced Benway in his early short story "Twilight's Last Gleamings", later published as part of the Interzone collection.⁵⁹ In that story, Benway appears as an incompetent ship's doctor. By the time he reappears in

Naked Lunch, however, he is described as: "... a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control."⁶⁰

Undercutting this threatening façade of evil, however, is the simultaneous presentation of Benway as the mad scientist of the movies, usually a comic figure:

BENWAY: "Balderdash, my boy ... We're scientists ... Pure scientists. Disinterested research and damned be he who cries, Hold, too much! Such people are no better than party poops."⁶¹

Here, Burroughs plays with and ultimately transgresses the traditionally privileged discourses of medicine and science in a complex process where elements of these fields that are already the material of comedy are reappropriated back into the high cultural ground of the text. This process of appropriation and reappropriation effectively renders categories on both sides of the high/low divide void of their claims to either truth or fiction. The transgressive treatment of truth and fiction in Burroughs' work has, in turn, been central to the development of new textual modalities since the early experimentation with form and method that we see in Naked Lunch.

The position of popular culture in the texts of Kerouac and Burroughs ranges from the relatively stable domains of reference and device through to a complex interrogation of representation and the textual construction of subjectivity. Kerouac's and Burroughs' first explorations of this complex space are characterised by the textualisation of their own subcultural codes, and by an appropriation of contemporaneous popular forms. Both of these textualising movements reappear as central elements in later postmodern fiction, along with an acute questioning of the process of representation itself. The end results of these processes are the construction of multifaceted textual spaces which rely upon diverse coding systems. The subjectivities which are constructed at the intersections of

these codes reveal themselves as always already reconfigured in cultural space.

IV

The sense of crisis in the representation of subjectivity is apparent in the work of Kerouac and Burroughs as early as 1952, a year in which they shared an apartment in Mexico City while they worked, respectively, on Naked Lunch and Dr. Sax. The experimental manner in which these texts deal with the representation of subjectivity align them with conceptions of *contretemps* on multiple levels. In Naked Lunch, the subject exists in an authoritarian dystopia where language, drugs and torture form a hegemonic fusion. Resistance takes the form of transgression: transgressions of language, literary conventions and subjectivity. Under the heading of transgression we can align the reaction to changing conceptions of subjectivity which emerged from the destabilisation of Western metaphysics that runs through Burroughs' and the work of later postmodern writers.

By contrast, although Kerouac's 1952 novel Dr. Sax was groundbreaking in both a stylistic and a paradigmatic sense, it takes another course than that of Burroughs' in Naked Lunch. Dr. Sax disrupted boundaries between high and low culture, introducing the popular discourses of cinema, song and comic books into the novel as reference material and as technical models. And so Kerouac's focus on language makes his work seem like an obvious transition point between the modes of foundational thought and those of anti-foundationalism. However, while this argument has validity with respect to a discussion of Burroughs' project, Kerouac's writing ultimately takes a different turn, away from Western conceptions of subjectivity and towards those of the East. Kerouac, in fact, disposes of the Western subject position with the transcendent possibilities

available in Eastern thought.

Kerouac's interest in Eastern philosophy in the mid-fifties changed both the style and the content of his fiction. To a certain extent, however, this change addressed, even more directly, the crisis in Western subjectivity. Kerouac's writing from this period expresses a desire to escape the confines of subjectivity through a form of Eastern transcendence, an impulse that was gestured at, examined, and finally rejected in the work of Melville, and discussed extensively in the works of mid-nineteenth century transcendentalists such as Thoreau in Walden and Whitman in Leaves of Grass. In an interview with Ted Berrigan, Kerouac attested to the influence of Buddhism on his writing:

... my serious Buddhism, that of ancient India, has influenced that part of my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious... The part of Zen that influenced my writing is the Zen contained in the haiku, the three lines, seventeen syllable poem written by guys like Basho, Issa, Shiki. A sentence that's short and sweet with a sudden jump of thought in it is a kind of haiku⁶²

In this statement Kerouac offers an insight into the role that Eastern thought plays in his work, suggesting links that straddle both the paradigmatic and the structural. The implications of this statement are best examined within these two categories of content and style, on the one hand examining the Eastern concepts of subjectivity that are apparent in the themes of Kerouac's texts, and on the other hand, examining how this view of subjectivity incorporates a specific view of language, and, consequently, writing.

Kerouac's 1958 novel The Dharma Bums⁶³ confronts the crisis in Western subjectivity within an explicit examination of Eastern modes of being. The novel traces the pitfalls of the narrator, Raymond Smith and his search for enlightenment in the cities and on the

backroads of America, as well as his attraction to Japhy Ryder, his potential guide and spiritual teacher. Through these characters, the novel explores what Kerouac sees as two polarities of Eastern thought: *Vedantic* Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, positioning them against the wider backdrop of America's own burgeoning crisis of the self.

David Loy's study of the relationship between Eastern thought and poststructural theory, *Nonduality*,⁶⁴ offers a useful insight into some of the key concepts explored within *The Dharma Bums*. His work examines Eastern constructions of subject/object relations, demonstrating that in Eastern thought's emphasis on escaping the grounded self and moving towards some previously existing nondualistic state, the deconstruction of subject/object relations is a central concern. Loy devotes a chapter to an exploration of the different ontologies implied by such a liberation from the self, identifying two key strains of nondualism: *Vedantic* Buddhism and Zen Buddhism. He demonstrates that *Vedanta* encompasses a view of subjectivity in which the notion of *Brahman*, the all-inclusive consciousness which dissolves the self in a sense of "all-selfness", is said to transcend the subject/object duality.⁶⁵ The aim of the devotee is, in this sense, to attain a state of "true being" through the truth that there is nothing else but self. In this case, the external object world is incorporated into the subject.⁶⁶ By contrast, Zen Buddhism claims that "from the beginning, nothing ever was" and so posits a basic assumption of meaninglessness. According to *Vedantic* Buddhism, the self seems to expand and encompass the world, and the subject and object are melded as one. By comparison, in Zen thought there is no self to begin with, therefore, the subject fades into the object.⁶⁷

Loy's detailed delineation of Eastern ontologies is a helpful frame to place around *The*

Dharma Bums. The two central characters of the novel, Raymond Smith and Japhy Ryder represent these two modes of Buddhism explicated by Loy in Nonduality. Smith seems to be shaped by *Vedantic* thought which, as we have seen, implies a sense of “all-selfness” and a merging with the object world. Ryder, on the other hand, operates within a Zen modality of absence. Smith’s nature is identified in his initial reaction to Japhy Ryder:

“I’d say that was a lot of silly Zen Buddhism.” That took Japhy back a bit. “Lissen Japhy,” I said, “I’m not a Zen Buddhist, I’m a serious Buddhist, I’m an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism,” and so forth into the night, my contention being that Zen Buddhism didn’t concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of the sources of all things.⁶⁸

Smith and Ryder’s polarity is further demonstrated on their first mountain climbing trip. Here Smith makes a comparison between the purity of the mountain and the degradation of a San Francisco bar, while Ryder’s response points out Smith’s misconceptions about Buddhism, as well a primary tenet of Zen:

Comparisons are odious, Smith,” he sent sailing back to me, quoting Cervantes and making a Zen observation to boot. “It don’t make a damn frigging difference whether you’re in The Place or hiking up Matterhorn, it’s all the same old void, boy.”⁶⁹

Ryder’s comments here highlight the basic premise of Zen: the void as opposed to the all-pervasive Self.

Kerouac’s examination of Buddhism in The Dharma Bums encompasses the wider ontological oppositions between presence and absence. However, the modes of Eastern thought that he considers take subjectivity as a given to be negated, and do not question beyond this consideration. Within the text’s structure, however, Kerouac excavates

Eastern notions of being more heavily, indebted himself almost exclusively to Zen concepts of philosophy and representation. A large portion of this debt takes the form of his fascination with the Japanese poetic forms of *haiku* and *koan* which are intrinsically contemplative forms of Zen. There is a sense in which *haiku* is an instrument of writing in which the object positions of all things are voided. The *koan*, a logic puzzle without a logical answer, involves a similar negation. The leaps of logic within the *haiku* or *koan* are effectively leaps which fragment logic in a process similar to that described by Derrida in "Aphorism Countertime". As an accidental shard of language expressing the absence of self and the failure of time, the *haiku* is a poetic example of Derrida's conception of aphorism. Like the aphorism, the *haiku* requires a metaphorical leap across space and time in order to mean. And, in its disassembly of the mechanics of logic, the *koan* is another Zen form which inscribes the conditions of *contretemps* into Kerouac's work.

An examination of some traditional Japanese *haiku*, for example, the work of one of Kerouac's key influences, seventeenth-century classical Japanese poet Basho, reveals another facet of his literary debt to the East. Basho is well known for his "travel sketches", which serve as records of his life "on the road". These sketches take the basic form of a travel diary and the *haiku* that appear in the text are composed in response to a particular place or situation. On a number of planes, Kerouac's "road" novels can also be identified with Basho's travel sketches. Basho's The Narrow Road to the Deep North⁷⁰ and Kerouac's On The Road are both first person narratives. In each text the journeys recounted are undertaken with no particular goal in mind. Travel may be initiated by seasonal change or other whims, but never for any specific utilitarian purpose. The

reasons Sal Paradise gives for travelling in On The Road are obscure and esoteric: "I was a young writer and I wanted to take off ... somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me."⁷¹ Basho offers similar, if somewhat more eloquent, reasons in The Narrow Road to the Deep North:

Those who steer a boat across the sea, or drive a horse over the land until they succumb to the weight of years, spend every minute of their lives travelling. There are a great number of ancients too, who died on the road. I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud moving wind, filled with a strong desire to wander...Following the example of the ancient priest I left my broken house on the River Sumida in the August...⁷²

Basho's *haiku* are nestled among the collage of people, places and events that form the wider structure of the "Travel Sketches". These stylistic nodes have their counterparts in Kerouac's texts in the form of sentences with a "sudden jump of thought in them", as he describes it in his interview with Ted Berrigan.⁷³ Many of Dean Moriarty's mad ramblings in On the Road display these illogical twists. Like Basho's *haiku* these beatnik epiphanies are usually linked to a character or a scene encountered by chance along the road. For example, when meeting a passing motorcyclist Dean says:

Now wouldn't it be fine if we could all get together and have a real going goofbang together with everybody sweet and fine and agreeable, no hassles, no infant rise of protest or body woes misconceptualised or sumpin? Ah! but we know time.⁷⁴

This movement from a particular observation toward a rambling incoherent abstraction, is typical of Dean's speaking processes, processes which increase as the book progresses. Dean is constantly pushing his attempts at making meaning beyond the confines of logical or grammatical structures to the point of finally being unable to speak at all:

As in a dream I saw him tiptoe in from the dark hall in his stocking feet. He couldn't talk any more. He hopped and laughed, he stuttered and fluttered his hands and said, "Ah -ah-you must listen to hear." We listened, all ears. But he forgot what he wanted to say. "Really listen - ahem. Look, dear Sal -

sweet Laura – I’ve come – I’m gone – but wait – ah yes.” And he stared with rocky sorrow into his hands. “Can’t talk no more – do you understand that it is – or might be – But listen!” Ww all listened. He was listening to sounds in the night. “Yes!” he whispered with awe. “But you see – no need to talk any more – and further.”⁷⁵

The disruption of logic is foregrounded in Basho’s work as well. He warns the reader that his writing is not to be trusted and that what is presented in the text as truth or reality may not be at all:

The reader will find in my diary a random collection of what I have seen on the road... Nevertheless I must admit that my records are a little more than the intoxicated and the rambling talk of the dreaming.⁷⁶

This warning applies to Kerouac’s work too for, in adopting the paradigms and stylistics of Buddhism, Kerouac also inherits the view of language that it implies. His technical manifesto “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”, for example, stresses the importance of writing spontaneously, that is, without restraint or correction.⁷⁷ On a primary level this technique might seem similar to the surrealist practice of automatic writing, however, Kerouac’s methods here make no claim to representing the unconscious in the way the surrealists did. Spontaneous prose must be understood primarily as a negation of dualistic thinking in the sense that Loy explains in Nonduality:

We might suppose a thinker necessary in order to provide the causal link between various thoughts, to explain how one thought leads to another; in fact there is no such link. In nondual thinking each thought is experienced as arising and passing away by itself, not determined by previous thoughts but “springing up” spontaneously.⁷⁸

Kerouac’s writing at its most experimental is an attempt to write from a position of authorial absence; absence in the sense that no logical shaping presence presides over the text. Indeed, in his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” Kerouac argues that a writer

should write "...if possible ... without consciousness"⁷⁹, and in "Belief in Technique for Modern Prose" he recommends that the writer must "accept loss forever."⁸⁰

The primary recognition behind this experiment in nondualistic writing is that dualistic thought is inscribed into the structures of language itself. In Nonduality Loy argues that this point aligns nondualistic thought, especially that of Zen, with Derridean theory. Loy, in fact, parallels the critique of self-presence in Zen with Derrida's construct of *différance* in language.⁸¹ This alignment is also made by Michelle Yeh in an article entitled "Beyond Negation: Zen as Deconstruction."⁸² Both Loy and Yeh read Eastern enlightenment into the parameters of deconstruction, which for Yeh is evident in the Derridean notion of "always already", and for Loy is found particularly in Derridean theories of proliferating pure textuality. For Loy and Yeh, language is essentially a half-way house, somewhere to reside in exile, a transcendent view of language which is also apparent in Kerouac's synthesis of Eastern thought in The Dharma Bums. Ultimately Kerouac's stylistic experiments aim to negate subjectivity by gesturing at something beyond the language in which the subject is constructed, and towards the possibility of transcendence through an escape from language. However, this is not a view that Derrida appears to support. Indeed, throughout his work he shows such notions of transformation or enlightenment to be neither desirable nor possible. He could easily be addressing Loy or Yeh when he describes the fate of those who dream "...of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign..."⁸³, suggesting that such dreamers "...live the necessity of interpretation as an exile."⁸⁴

To a certain degree, Kerouac's Buddhist writings are an attempt to interrupt the Western

trajectory of the subject, interjecting at crisis points in order to offer a form of enlightenment that might come from the effacement of subject/object dualities. We find within these works speculative gestures against the Cartesian *cogito* and against the constructs which maintain its primacy, particularly knowledge and language. Kerouac's work opens up a space between popular and sanctioned culture, speculating on how this space might be repositioned through new modes of thinking, writing, and being. Ultimately, however, Kerouac's writing preserves the prospect that the prevailing conditions of Western enlightenment may be transcended by a version of enlightenment from the East. In Burroughs' work, however, we find a rather different approach to the consideration of subjectivity. Rather than exploring alternative modes of enlightenment, in Naked Lunch, Burroughs exhibits a view of identity which seeks to transgress rather than transcend the reign of the Cartesian subject.

Naked Lunch is structured as a montage of "routines" that, theoretically, can be read in any order. Burroughs announces this structure in the "Atrophied Preface" which appears at the end of the book, telling readers to "...cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point"⁸⁵ and that "the Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order".⁸⁶ The routines of Naked Lunch consist of monologues, dialogues, plot episodes, scene descriptions, and the like. Within these routines, Burroughs' technique is improvisational and cinematic, juxtaposing startling images one over the other, destabilising both in the process. Violence and chaos are key notes in the text, as are seemingly factual discussions of Burroughs' own experiences of the netherworlds he exposes in the book. The novel moves from supposedly autobiographical material into dystopic narratives of addiction and control, concluding

with another autobiographical “preface” that discusses, in an apparently straight forward fashion, the novel's construction, as well as providing a helpful appendix of all the drugs mentioned in the novel.

Naked Lunch's key concerns, however, centre on the role of language in constructing and controlling the subject, an exploration which finds its vehicles in drug use and in the manipulative schemings of the evil technocrat Dr. Benway. In this way, the introduction to Naked Lunch is an attempt by Burroughs to illuminate all of the dimensions of heroin addiction to the uninitiated, referring to addiction here as the “algebra of need”. Naked Lunch is, in fact, the direct literary manifestation of such a state, revealing the transformation of addict into automaton, as the addict is drawn further and further away from being “human”, and closer and closer to a state of being constructed entirely by “junk” consumption.⁸⁷ This movement away from human-ness is at the heart of Naked Lunch, and, in its gathering of anti-humanist forces, has obvious parallels to the tenor of The Education of Henry Adams. In many ways, Naked Lunch is the culmination of some of those anti-humanist and dehumanising forces that Adams first identified: the “statistical subject” and the effacement of individual agency by technology, for example. In Naked Lunch Burroughs reveals a vision of the Cartesian subject, now assembled from the mechanisms of control and paranoia; mechanisms which each offer a path that eventually converges on the linguistically constructed subject.

The connections between subjectivity and control in Naked Lunch are channelled through the character of Dr. Benway. Benway is employed by Islam Inc. in Freeland, one of the many ontological zones of the text, and seems to be a hybrid of a range of occupations

ranging from medical doctor to psychoanalyst to secret policeman. The most telling description of his skills, however, reveals that “Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert in all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control.”⁸⁸ The Doctor provides an example of his skills when he describes his recent activities in the State of Annexia. What is of particular interest in this description, is Benway’s preference for gaining and maintaining authority through the manipulation of language and language structures, rather than through the use of physical powers:

“I deplore brutality,” he said. “It’s not efficient. On the other hand, prolonged mistreatment, short of physical violence, gives rise, when skilfully applied, to anxiety and a feeling of special guilt. A few rules or rather guiding principles must be borne in mind. The subject must not realize that the mistreatment is a deliberate attack of an anti-human enemy on his personal identity ...”⁸⁹

Benway’s use of language in this attack on identity takes on a specific methodology. The first step in his plan of “total demoralization” requires:

Every citizen of Annexia to apply for and carry on his person at all times a whole portfolio of documents. Citizens were subject to be stopped in the street at any time... for an examiner to inspect their papers. The examiner, when he stopped a large group, would only examine and stamp the cards of a few. The others were then subject to arrest because their cards were not properly stamped.⁹⁰

Once Benway relocates the citizen’s identity in language, he systematically refuses them any verification of this identity. Eventually, “Documents issued in vanishing ink faded into old pawn tickets. New documents were constantly required. The citizens rushed from one bureau to another in a frenzied attempt to meet impossible deadlines.”⁹¹

Benway’s imposition of the signifier is like a grotesque parody of the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic calling forth, but at the same time petrifying, the subject; the process of Lacanian alienation in which the subject is both defined and compromised by its entry into language.⁹² Once the subject is alienated in the Symbolic, Benway goes on to explain

some of his more conventional weapons of control. He describes a machine which punishes the user for not keeping up with a series of reactions on a switchboard. Benway claims that:

Half an hour on the switchboard and the subject breaks down like an overloaded thinking machine. The study of thinking machines teaches us more about the brain than we can learn by introspective methods. Western man is externalising himself in the form of gadgets.⁹³ (33)

It seems that long before Pynchon's *Oedipa Maas*, Burroughs also saw the regimenting spectre of "... ones and zeros twinned above...ahead, thick, maybe endless."⁹⁴

V

The notion of subjectivity as being somehow locked into the binary machinery of language is paralleled in *Naked Lunch* by a corresponding focus on drugs and supplementation. Benway claims that "... pending more precise knowledge of brain electronics, drugs remain an essential tool of the interrogator in his assault on the subject's personal identity."⁹⁵ He then explains the effects of various drugs on the subjects he manipulates. Drugs, like language in Derrida's reinscription of Plato's *Pharmakon*, can be both medicine and poison.⁹⁶ Similarly, all of Burroughs' characters are addicts of one sort or another, and their addictions define them and debilitate them at the same time. Drugs and language both have the potential for liberation and control, and in *Naked Lunch* the subject is constructed within these two extremes. Ultimately, Benway's attempts at ultimate control fail because, as Derrida shows too, the subject is always situated in the inherently unstable realm of language, a point which Burroughs foregrounds in the cut-up construction of the work. Subjectivity here, like meaning, slips between the fissures of the bits and pieces that make up the text. Between the dualisms of

addiction and control; poison and antidote; sign and referent; self and other, is the space of transgression and the rule of the transgressor, a point which Burroughs demonstrates throughout the work on a variety of structural and paradigmatic levels. Rather than suggesting, as Kerouac seems to, that transcendence is the legacy of nondualism, Burroughs gestures towards the space that is exposed when Western dualisms break down. It is this transgressive gesture and this transgressive space that is tracked in the following chapter on the work of late twentieth century writer Kathy Acker.

The work of Kerouac and particularly Burroughs, then, stands in a direct relationship to Acker's work, highlighting as it does, the construction of an already embattled Western subjectivity. However, it is also possible to look back from these Beat texts and see in them the further development of those questions first raised by Melville and Adams about the nature and make-up of American identity. Certainly, the formal qualities of Kerouac's and Burroughs' texts conform to the characteristics laid down earlier as aphoristic: textual and narrative fragmentation; structural and paradigmatic discordance; generic instability; and the radical interrogation of subjectivity against the backdrop of a relentless modernity.

The unique contribution of Kerouac and Burroughs within this lineage in terms of their representational strategies, is found in their introduction to many of the forms of popular culture into the literary text. The effect of this strategy saw the terminal disruption of the traditional categories of high and low culture. These strategies would soon be adopted by a broader band of postmodern writers, Acker among them, and the controversy surrounding it would figure largely in the debate over postmodern representation.

Kerouac's and Burroughs' interrogation of subjectivity would also inform the literature of the late twentieth century. In one sense, Kerouac's work sees the reappearance of the transcendental urge first witnessed in Melville's writing. This urge, though heavily mutated, does continue into postmodern fiction. Much more pervasive, though, is the influence of Burroughs' transgressions of subjectivity, and his location of this subjectivity in the linguistic field.

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⁴ See the following article for a detailed discussion of the publication history of *Naked Lunch*. Loranger, C. "The Book Spills off the Page: What is the Text of *Naked Lunch*?", in *Postmodern Culture* 10: 1, September 1999, retrieved from <http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/textonly/issue.999/10.1contents.html>, Jan 20, 2002

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¹⁸ Ibid, p5

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ On this point see, for example, Watson, S. *The Birth of the Beats: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters 1944-1960*. NY: Pantheon, 1995, pp261-264

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- ²³ Ibid, p20
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- ⁸⁷ Ibid
- ⁸⁸ Ibid, p31
- ⁸⁹ Ibid
- ⁹⁰ Ibid
- ⁹¹ Ibid, p32
- ⁹² Lacan, J. Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis. (ed), Miller, J-A, (trans) Sheridan, A. NY: Norton, 1981, p207
- ⁹³ Burroughs, W. Naked Lunch. NY: Grove Press, 1959, p33
- ⁹⁴ Pynchon, T. The Crying of Lot 49. London: Picador, 1979, p125
- ⁹⁵ Burroughs, W. Naked Lunch. NY: Grove Press, 1959, p34
- ⁹⁶ See Derrida, J. "Play: From the Pharmakon to the Letter and from Blindness to the Supplement," in Dissemination. (trans). Johnson, B. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 156-171;

“Against Ordinary Language”: Aphorism at the End of the Twentieth Century

"The following is a true story:"
"William Burroughs' Realism", Kathy Acker¹

I

In an essay on William Burroughs, Kathy Acker describes contemporary America as a "giant baby, perhaps mongoloid, almost uneducated and increasingly uninterested in questioning and education, who unknowingly breaks everything it meets as it crawls around in chaotic paths ..."². For this reason, she says, writers such as the (mostly) men who have made up the twentieth century American literary canon: "The big men. Norman Mailer ... Philip Roth; John Cheever; ... Saul Bellow ..." have only managed to present a conditional critique of their culture. While their work is certainly caustic about the state of America, it is marred by its "cultured tone" and its "well measured language"³; its failure, in other words, to step outside the American frame or to understand that measured critique is an impotent instrument against the conditions of contemporary culture. Acker argues that it is not in the "pantheon of great living American writers"⁴ that the insanity of late twentieth century America would be expressed, but rather in the disintegrating and fractured "baby-talk" of Burroughs' work which terrifyingly "... portray[s] futures which are now our present."⁵

Acker's observations on Burroughs foreground key elements in contemporary culture at the end of the twentieth century. Using words such as "discontinuity" and "dissolution" "fractured" and "jutting", she describes how Burroughs' form and structure underlines the truth about America; words that also appear throughout Derrida's meditation on aphorism, and which form the basis of the American anti-foundational literary tradition. More particularly though, Acker's choice of words here describes the nature of her own

work; a body of writing which is radically discontinuous and dissolute, fragmented and jutting, and connected genealogically to Burroughs' work in intention and modality.

This chapter examines Kathy Acker's writing as a complex space where the aphoristic modality is both relocated and reinscribed into the late twentieth century context, but where it is also interrogated for its political or revolutionary implications. Like Melville, Adams, Kerouac and Burroughs, Acker remains primarily interested in the machinery that allows sanctioned notions of history, representation and subjectivity to produce and reproduce the power bases of American culture. However, her work also reflects the fact that these bases are no longer grounded in the mechanics of industry or even modern capitalism, but rather are formed from the less stable materials of media and information and the version of capitalism that they necessarily engender. In this sense, Acker's work speaks of different disjunctures than those we have yet seen, and her writing is situated at different intersections too: those that arise when the generic distinctions between fiction, theory and politics are erased. In Don Quixote and Empire of the Senseless, the texts that this chapter specifically examines, Acker employs aphoristic methods to break down political and cultural hegemonies centred around representation and subjectivity, and demonstrates how these methods might offer alternatives to these cornerstones of Western foundational thought.

Burroughs' work, described ironically as "journalism" by Acker in "William Burroughs' Realism", presents a dark view of American culture where the self is swallowed alive by the forces of the all-consuming and all-controlling State. In Burroughs' work, subjectivity is obliterated or mutated by the manipulations of those conglomerates whose

key tools begin and end in language. This radical relocation of the subject in the linguistic field is subsequently adopted by Acker in her own work. However, if Burroughs' project is a type of "telling it like it is", as Acker argues and as the title of Naked Lunch suggests, then her own texts display a further, and more extreme, elaboration of this strategy. While Naked Lunch reveals the crisis of the modern subject in the emerging postmodern scene, Acker's work relentlessly *speaks* this subject position. This means that rather than delineating or reflecting postmodern practices, typically the mechanics of parody and exhaustion seen in the work of many of her contemporaries, Acker's purpose is centred on the actual destruction of representational practices themselves. To do this, she positions her work within the ruins of signification where the signifier exceeds meaning. This destruction of the signifying process, however, is not all there is, for in the moment of this destruction, Acker also considers the possibility that new forms and new subjects might be uncovered that might speak differently from out of these ruins.

Such a possibility positions Acker's fiction within the trajectory of American aphorism. In her work, the aphorism functions as the signifier of ruin or excess, operating as a speculative device. Through aphorism, Acker tries to imagine another way of "naming" in Derrida's terms. To seek this, she exposes the revolutionary potential of *contretemps*; and questions whether through chance, accident or speculation, something other than an unconscionable absence might come out of the destruction of all foundations. This is not to say that Acker is some kind of latter-day fisher-king, shoring up the ruins of a blighted culture with her talismanic texts. On the contrary, her writing documents the archaeology of collapse, where Western culture crumples into a Nietzschean "twilight" or a

Heideggerian “decline”, and celebrates this moment of collapse without mourning for the passing of old ways or structures.

II

For Kathy Acker, America at the end of the twentieth century is personified as “Daddy”: the cowboy, the rockstar, the king, the robot, the all-consuming mouth who would engulf his children with insatiable incestuous desire. Daddy’s domain is the media, the endlessly circulating textuality of everything, the material of information which neither forms nor informs in its ceaseless flow. Daddy could be Reagan or Bush or Clinton, presidents of the media-age who straddle the 1980s and 1990s as master-manipulators of this new mode of rule, and indeed the world of the late twentieth century is symbolised by these central figures, most paradigmatically, perhaps, in the figure of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan, a matinee idol and B Grade actor of the 1950s was elected President of the USA in 1980, an event that heralded not only the coming demise of the Welfare State and the Centrist policies of Franklin Roosevelt that had dominated America since the mid 1930s, but also signified the ultimate victory of the media over the “authentic” or the “original” within cultural production, and the triumph of popular space over the ground of high culture. Reagan represented the ascent of the forces of popular culture and media society into the seat of power. Here was a man whose very existence was constructed out of the debris of network news soundbites, photo opportunities, gossip column rumours, psychic predictions, and looped fragments of his former life as a national salesman for General Electric, and star of “Bonzo Goes to College.” As Stephen Greenblatt writes in an article entitled “Towards a Poetics of Culture”:

To a remarkable extent, Ronald Reagan continues to live within the movies; he has been shaped by them, draws much of his cold war rhetoric from them, and cannot or will not distinguish between them and an external reality. Indeed, his political career has depended upon the ability to project himself and his audience into a realm in which there is no distinction between simulation and reality.⁶

In many ways, the Reagan years, and those following, catapulted the discourse of media and popular culture into the centre of art practice, where it continues to reign.

This is the America of the late twentieth century: Wall Street types, hair slicked back, horn-rimmed glasses on, drive their Porsches relentlessly through congested cities in search of *nouvelle cuisine*. Like Patrick Bateman, protagonist of Bret Easton Ellis' *cause celebre* novel of 1991, American Psycho, they ingest cocaine by the pound, vote Republican, collect "avant-garde" paintings and consider the Top Twenty to be the serious future of culture. American missiles point StarWars-ward, while on the ground the cities are exploding, just as Jane Jacobs had predicted in 1965.⁷ From out of the rubble, shimmering mirror glass edifices appear from nowhere. Labour is erased. Les Misérables is a hit. Viruses mutate and spread silently through the world. Princess Diana tends to the sick on television.

Like American Psycho also, late twentieth century America lies between two flashing signs: "ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE" and "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT"⁸, in a proliferating bevy of consumer products and media images:

The suit I wear today is from Alan Flusser. It's an eighties drape suit, which is an updated version of the thirties style. The favored version has extended natural shoulders, a full chest and a bladed back. The soft-rolled lapels should be about four inches wide with the peak finishing three quarters of the way across the shoulders... The trousers are deeply pleated and cut full in order to continue the flow of the wide jacket. An extended waist is cut slightly higher in the front. Tabs make the suspenders fit well at the center back. The tie is a

dotted silk design by Valentino Couture. The shoes are crocodile loafers by A. Testoni. While I'm dressing the TV is kept on to *The Patty Winters Show*. Today's guests are women with multiple personalities. A nondescript overweight older woman is on the screen and Patty's voice is heard asking, "Well, is it schizophrenia or what's the deal? *Tell us.*" ...⁹

More particularly, the modes of production have changed during this time from the industrial to the postindustrial, and information has become the key currency within this transformed economy. Everything and everyone is connected, through old media - mass communication, and through new media - information technology and specifically the Internet. Consequently, as David Harvey argues in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, we are now experiencing a phase of time-space compression which has had a profoundly disruptive effect on key political, economic and social practices.¹⁰ It is the speed of production and communication that has altered our sense of time and space and created a culture centred on the instantaneous, in which notions of continuity, progress and history are erased. Harvey quotes Italo Calvino on this point, who writes:

... the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot live or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded...¹¹

Jean Baudrillard, who considers the latter twentieth century's pleasure in the quick fix as:

"... a triumph of effect over cause, of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of surface and of pure objectivization over the depth of desire"¹², sees this new modality as a catastrophic rupture in the ground of culture:

The universe is not dialectical; it moves towards the extremes, and not towards equilibrium; it is devoted to a radical antagonism, and not to reconciliation or to synthesis. And it is the same with the principle of Evil. It is expressed in the cunning genius of the object, in the ecstatic form of the pure object, and its victorious strategy over the subject.¹³

In such a world, the sovereignty of the subject is denied and must be abandoned in favour of the malign new rule of the object. According to Baudrillard, the proliferation of information in the media, the all-too-visible nature of communication technologies are all part of the “fatal strategies” used to enforce the rule of the object over the subject.¹⁴

Within this object-oriented world, he argues, the subject’s utter evisceration precludes all possibilities of transformation and indeed, announces an end to the subject, and an end to history itself:

Suddenly, there is a curve in the road, a turning point. Somewhere the real scene has been lost, the scene where you had rules for the game and some solid stakes that everyone could rely on.¹⁵

For Baudrillard, there are no longer any stable structures, events with consequences, or forms of determination through which one could delineate historical trajectories or lines of development. Instead, everything is indeterminate and unpredictable. Baudrillard’s vision of the present and the future is a doomed one, where the frantic attempts to gather and circulate information and to record historical events are symptomatic of a desperate awareness that there is no more history to come: “It remains for us to accommodate ourselves to the time that is left to us... The end of the century is before us like an empty beach.”¹⁶ Baudrillard’s presentation of contemporary culture as an “empty beach” resonates throughout Kathy Acker’s writing. In fact, this connection between Baudrillard and Acker in itself underlines a key aphoristic mode in her work; the effacement of the boundary between theory and fiction. Just as time and space are radically telescoped in postmodernity so too are generic borders, already under heavy attack throughout the twentieth century, subject to a radical dismantling in her writing. Jameson distinguished

the collapse of generic boundaries as a central signifier of postmodernity,¹⁷ and indeed, within Acker's work generic distinctions are simply irrelevant.

Perhaps it is Acker's theoretical complexities that have lead to the ascendant position her writing has begun to hold in the field of postmodern literary scholarship. In recent years her work has been taken a great deal more seriously than when it first began to be published, and she is now often to be found alongside stellar postmodern writers such as Pynchon or DeLillo in discussions of contemporary literature. While critical output does not necessarily reflect this, nonetheless, her work is variously claimed as an articulation of postmodernity and most particularly, as an articulation of the position of women living through postmodernity. It is important to note, however, that Acker is not a feminist in the popular sense. Indeed, populist or more specifically, essentialist feminism is often derided in her books, in the "I am Erica Jong", section of Blood and Guts in High School¹⁸, for example, and more notoriously in the fact that she used to make a habit of roving around unsuspecting bookshops and scribbling pictures of penises into books written by "radical feminist" Andrea Dworkin.¹⁹ Acker's feminism is distinct from those models seeking to simply invert traditional power structures. Her writing shows no interest in pointing out instances of inequality or exploitation for didactic purposes, but rather, is concerned with the machinery that produces and reproduces a binary economy of gender. In effect, her work razes such structures and examines the possibilities of a world where all structures are destroyed, a gesture that is in itself out of time with essentialist modes of feminist thought, or conversely the increasingly triumphant proclamations of the arrival of a "postfeminist" society in contemporary America. This positions Acker's feminism closer to the theoretical intentions of Baudrillard or Derrida

than to those of Erica Jong or WAP (Women Against Pornography), another target of her derision.

III

Acker's aphoristic feminism, in fact, converges with anti-foundational thought at the point where structures and institutions are reproduced: at the site of representation. The issue of representation is central to Acker's project which, as she reiterates throughout her work, seeks the possibility of a world without logic, without *logos*, the Word.

Representation is also a primary concern within wider anti-foundational epistemologies.

What can and cannot be represented is always a question of ideology. Traditionally, what is perceived as reality or truth comes through language in an exchange that is unspoken and always hidden and the reality that emerges in this exchange erases other realities through the functioning of language. Further, representational practices eternally defer these experiences of reality in a process that must necessarily take a textual detour.

Texts, then, do not reflect or mimic reality, but they are the only mode of reality available. Reality and truth can only be experienced in a mediated and second hand fashion, and are always-already text.

Catharine Stimpson explains the ideological apparatuses of representation in an essay entitled "Nancy Reagan Wears a Hat: Feminism and its Cultural Consensus":

Like every great word, "representation" is a stew. A scrambled menu, it serves up several meanings at once. For a representation can be an image – visual, verbal or aural. Think of a picture of a hat. A representation can also be a narrative, the sequence of images and ideas. Think of the sentence, "Nancy Reagan wore a hat when she visited a detoxification clinic in Florida." Or a representation can be a product of ideology, that vast scheme for showing forth the world and justifying its dealings. Think of the sentence, "Nancy Reagan, in her hat, is a proper woman."²⁰

Stimpson's conceit of the hat is an illuminating one, showing the various progressions between the representation of the hat and the veiled representation of the "proper woman". In a wider sense, the exposition of this kind of progression is at the heart of anti-foundational analyses of representational practices. Acker's writing reveals a similar critique of representation's complicity with ideological mechanisms, designating the primary tool of representation, language, as the means by which institutions and power bases are maintained. In this way, her work is not so much a window on the world through which we might encounter reality, as it is a demonstration that the window's glass is smudged and cracked, that the window "frames" reality in an ideological sense, and its view is merely a reflection of its own flaws and not of some outside vista.

More specifically, though, Acker's interest in representational practices is tied to her wider project to destroy "... all normalizing institutions ... to speak precisely that which the codes forbid ..." ²¹ These codes: language, patriarchy, subjectivity, which construct and maintain the paranoid relations of Western culture, are radically destabilised in Acker's work. They do not exist discretely, but operate within an oppositional economy in which the traditional hierarchies that enforce representational codes erupt.

Subject/object; self/other; presence/absence; male/female; spoken/unspeakable; these dualisms are strung out across Acker's texts to be violently wrenched apart and exposed as so much excrement. Excrement or excess is indeed the product of binary codes, which could explain why Acker's writing is literally full of shit. In each of these oppositions, the sublimated element is never completely subsumed and spills over to exceed the limits of what can be coded and what must remain uncoded, producing what Acker herself

describes as “blab”..²² An all-out attack on the codes of language, then, is one of the crucial aspects of Acker’s revolutionary intent.

In an essay entitled “The Technology of Gender”, Teresa de Lauretis points to a similar presentation of excess within some forms of contemporary film making. She describes the idea of the “space-off” as a term used in film theory to name the elements which cannot be seen within the frame, but which may be inferred from what that frame makes visible. De Lauretis’ also describes how traditional mimetic film often attempts to seal the cinematic image into “reality” by denying the existence of the “space-off”.²³ She points out that the space-off is actually the excess of the image; that which overflows the frame and disrupts the seamless transfer of image to reality. By contrast, in non-traditional or experimental cinema attention is often drawn to the space-off. This disturbs the moment of transfer and disrupts the mechanics of representation. When the space-off is apprehended and the image is “...received, re-constructed and re-produced in/as subjectivity...”²⁴ then, argues De Lauretis, we are participants in the destruction of representation.

In experimental film making, the space-off effectively up-ends traditional representational practices. And although it does not do away with representation completely, its effect is to complicate those ideological mechanics normally used to transfer image into reality. In this way, de Lauretis’ delineation of the space-off articulates revolutionary possibilities that might already exist within the codes of representational practices. In Acker’s work too, we see a similar exposition of the fictional “space-off”, those regions of experience which can traditionally only be inferred

by their absence in conventional texts. Her writing effectively turns traditional literature and traditional literary processes inside out, revealing their relationship to ideological codes that are usually disguised by ornate fictional frames.

Significantly too, the space-off works in a similar way to Derrida's description of Romeo and Julie as "theatre of night" in "Aphorism Countertime". When the curtain rises on the play, Derrida suggests, the audience is disconnected from its usual experience of theatre and placed instead into the flux of *contretemps*. Throughout, our attention is drawn to the constructed and rhetorical nature of the plot through the aphoristic devices that Derrida delineates: collapsing generic boundaries, textual and narrative fragmentation; structural and paradigmatic discordance; and the radical destabilisation of subjectivity. We are constantly pushed away from the action of the play and cannot be engulfed by the world presented within it. In this way, Derrida argues, a distance between play and audience is maintained and the fusion of reality is circumvented. Any willing suspension of disbelief is broken because the play constantly exposes itself as rhetoric rather than as mimesis. This space between the play and the play's construction of the real is figured in Derrida's argument as "night", a notion which has many similarities to de Lauretis' space-off. As "theatre of the night", Romeo and Juliet does not stage the visible "*scène*", but rather "...stages what is not seen, the name; what ...one cannot see or ...is not certain of seeing Theatre of the name, theatre of night. The name calls beyond presence."²⁵

The complex relationship between representation and the excesses of representation; the space-off or the "night", operate throughout Acker's work in a variety of ways. In an interview with Ellen Friedman, she foregrounds one strategy for exploring the ideology

of representation in an extensive discussion on plagiarism. She compares her use of appropriated texts to the way in which postmodern artist Sherrie Levine creates art works: “When I did Don Quixote, what I really wanted to do was a Sherrie Levine painting. I’m fascinated by Sherrie’s work.”²⁶ Acker’s fascination with Sherrie Levine’s particular mode of art production surfaces in Don Quixote in a variety of forms, all of which demonstrate the connection her work has to the epistemological and ontological concerns of anti-foundational thinking. Those concerns have already been demonstrated in this discussion in various philosophical and fictional contexts, however, in Acker’s work and in Sherrie Levine’s work too, these concerns are further radicalised and become the material of performance in a way that exposes, in de Lauretis’ terms, the space-off of representational practice, or in Derrida’s terms, fiction of the night.

One of Levine’s most discussed series of works, After ..., has particular relevance to Acker’s writing, as it explores the notion of authenticity and ownership within the making and collecting of art works. In this series, Levine enacts an extensive critical dialogue with the American artistic tradition by appropriating and reproducing the works of artists such as Edward Weston, Walker Evans and Alexander Rodchenko as works of art “created” by Sherrie Levine. This act of plagiarism which, as Levine herself says “... celebrates doubt and uncertainty”²⁷ is also one of Acker’s key performative strategies in her most complex early novel, Don Quixote. If, as she says, her intention with Don Quixote was to “... do a Sherrie Levine painting ...”, then it is in the use of strategies such as plagiarism and in the explicit examination of the ideology of art-making that the links between the two artists can be found. From the title of Don Quixote and onwards, the text resounds with the echoes of other writing and other voices. This concept of the

“echoing” text is not only found in this novel but is a strategy that proliferates throughout all of her writing. Consider these titles for example: Great Expectations, My Death, My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini. In these works and in those that follow, Acker, like Levine participates in the worst of artistic crimes: she steals other words and presents them as her own.

Raymond Federman, in an article entitled “Surfiction”, argues that “...imagination does not invent the SOMETHING NEW ...but merely imitates, copies, repeats, proliferates – plagiarises in other words – what has always been there.”²⁸ In such a re-imagining, imagination can only be original in its omissions and its inaccuracies, the absences implied within its inclusions, the lapses of memory around its remembrances, the seams where the plagiarised texts come together and redefine each other. Don Quixote is assembled at this seam, and in its assemblage as plagiarism, emphasises and exposes these absences of selection which for Acker, as for Levine or de Lauretis, are where new representational strategies might emerge from. In this way, plagiarism obstructs and destroys the logic of representation, and, in effect, takes us closer to reality, or the real, than any traditional representational modality might, unveiling the mechanisms with which fiction is converted to truth. Rather than attempting to encourage the reader to believe that a book is a world in itself as well as a “pure” representation of the world, Don Quixote, as a text made of other texts, emphasises the derivativeness of all writing, its mediated, unreliable and ideologically constituted status.

In situating Don Quixote within the writing process, Acker foregrounds the potential power of this process, suggesting that it is here new representational strategies might lie.

In an aphoristic sense, Acker opens writing up in order to erase the limits between what can and cannot be represented, which is perhaps why the novel begins with the scene of an abortion. Abortion, like childbirth, exposes the connections between the interior and the exterior body. But unlike childbirth, abortion is an act which is performed *on* the body, rather than an act which the body might perform itself. Abortion is the means by which the body is emptied, and in Acker's approach to the writing of this novel we find that the body, the "corpus" of Western literature, is similarly emptied and left in pieces. It has been said that what Acker does to the likes of Cervantes or Wedekind is an "abortion" of sorts. Nonetheless, the protagonist of the text, the female Don Quixote, is constructed from the remains of this body of works. She uses these remains to create for herself an identity and a purpose, "...to love"²⁹, a quest which, given the dystopic society represented, is the most "Quixotic" act imaginable.

As Don Quixote's quest expands through the plagiarised landscape of male-authored texts, she investigates the limits of language in an attempt to somehow get beyond it and towards a "...speech of her own."³⁰ The possibility for this is offered at one point in the novel in an "inserted" comparison of "Arab" and Western writing strategies:

Unlike American and Western culture (generally), the Arabs (in their culture) have no (concept of) originality. That is, culture. They write new stories paint new pictures et cetera only by embellishing old stories pictures... They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making jokes out of matters that should be of the outmost importance to us such as nuclear warfare... A typical Arab text, or painting contains neither characters nor narrative, for an Arab, believing such fictions're evil, worships nothingness.³¹

Arabs, like Don Quixote in this novel, undermine representation's stake over truth in their refusal to revere the authority of the original or the author in any form. Acker shows this

to be a radically oppositional gesture against foundational assumptions, not just of representation, but also of all modes of rule where oppositions and hierarchies are enacted and maintained.

In situating Don Quixote on the margins of other writings, Acker also undermines a number of other traditional narrative devices. Her portrayal of Don Quixote, for example, defies normal literary conventions about character which rely on a central organising consciousness for the reader to identify with. Don Quixote is not so much a character as an absence of character. She is certainly not a coherent construction, much less one that would allow a reader to be guided by her actions and interactions in her infiltration of the fictional space-off. As a protagonist, Don Quixote does not reveal a “real self” that the reader might uncover through enough “close reading” or a search beneath the text’s proliferating surface, rather, information given about her simply fails to signify and floats across the text without taking root as reality. In a way, the obfuscation of character here is a further analysis of the self first specifically evident in The Education of Henry Adams. Like Adams’ manikin, Don Quixote is a cipher; a figure that does not so much speak, as is spoken through.

And the authorial selves that Acker and Adams present in their work are also comparable. If Adams creates the beginnings of a prosthetic vision of the authorial self, a reified and distanced subjectivity, then in Acker’s work this vision reaches a nightmarish climax in which the assembled versions of being presented become machine-like configurations of autobiographical detritus. In this process Acker subverts her own position as the author of the text. This occurs through a layering of pseudo-autobiographical details designed to

throw “Acker the character” to the surface of the novel, foregrounding “Acker writing the book”, at the same time as delaying the truth about “Acker/author”. In Don Quixote, as in much of her other work, Acker litters the pages with obsessively repeated details of her own (possibly? apparently?) life which, rather than revealing the “truth about Kathy Acker”, actually manages to disguise this truth behind a montage of other fragments, including a suicidal mother, a brutal and insatiable stepfather, a rape, abortions, a period of time spent in prostitution and work as a pornographic model. Just as Don Quixote is obscured by the proliferation of other texts within the novel, so too the author’s authority over the work is made into a fiction. The stuff that might be Acker’s biography becomes, in Don Quixote, simply another text.

Don Quixote’s search for identity and for a new mythical structure leads not to a sense of transcendence or salvation, as we might have seen in Melville or Kerouac’s writing, but rather suggests a relationship between these versions of transcendence and the static and atrophied notion of Heideggerian “Being”. In the novel, Don Quixote is said to be “dead”: “She decided she’d rather be dead than worse than dead.”³² However, death is a site of alterior potential. As a corpse, she speaks from the ruins of Being through the ruins of language. Yet, it is in this mode that she is able to speculate on alternative routes out of Western subject positions and representational strategies in a consideration of the possibilities available through the process of “becoming”. This is indicated in her refusal to speak in the master-code, and her replacement of that code with the alternative languages of excess: “I’ll no longer speak because you are not hearing and will never hear me no matter how I speak. So I am a mass of dreams desires which, since I can no longer express them, are foetuses beyond their times...”³³ Dreams and desires, the

language of the unconscious, signals the possibilities of another code for representing and another mode of being. And while to some degree, Don Quixote is prevented from completely escaping traditional modalities and must assume some of the roles laid out for her in the appropriated texts she navigates: Andrei Biely's Petersburg, Giuseppe di Lampedusa's The Leopard, Frank Wedekind's Lulu and the poems of Catullus, nonetheless, her struggle is towards a new female subjectivity-in-process, a state of "becoming" and an end to "Being". In this quest, she attempts to create a new language community from out of the wreckage of the old: "For when there is no country, no community, the speaker's unsure of which language to use, how to speak, if it's possible to speak. Language is community. Dogs, I'm now inventing a community for you and me."³⁴

Don Quixote maps the possibilities for another way of thinking about representation that might exceed the limits of received structures by exploring the potential of excess, or the space-off. Like experimental film or art making, Acker's writing exposes the ways in which representation complies with ideology, at the same time as it examines the potential for representation in the concept of excess. However, in the case presented by Acker in Don Quixote for such an alternative, the ultimate result is failure, as the protagonist, Don Quixote, cannot in the end, step outside those boundaries of representation and finally returns to silence, absence and death. Her quest to find love beyond language by "... fighting all of your Culture..."³⁵ concludes as she wakes from a dream to discover there are "...no more new stories, no more tracks, no more memories..."³⁶, and only what has always been, "...the world which lay before me"³⁷; the world of the real as constructed in representation.

IV

Most problematic to Don Quixote's quest for a reality that is not limited by the constructs of representation, a quest which is also central to Acker's project, is the central recognition that by its very nature, Western being or subjectivity must be structured by language. This ontology relies on the acknowledgment of a stable and self-aware subject who, in the act of thinking, is able to apprehend itself thinking: the mechanism of the Cartesian *cogito*. Like representation, however, the stable Cartesian self must, by the nature of mediation, contain within it the possibilities of excess or, in de Lauretis' terms, the space-off. Indeed, this is the great insight of psychoanalysis: that the unconscious is essentially a space where all that cannot be contained by the mechanisms of subjectivity is situated. This unconfined arena, according to Lacan, is the realm of the Imaginary, the site where the supremacy of the stable subject is placed into doubt. However, the space of the Imaginary is not just to be found within purely unconscious states, such as in dreaming or hallucinatory moments. It is also found in the space that exists in language itself, between words and things, between the signifier and the signified.

For Lacan, the structure of the subject is not stable. There are clearly unmapped territories within subjectivity which cannot be represented, just as there are spaces within the economy of signification that resist meanings. Julia Kristeva has examined this insight further and argues that this space is the site of abjection: the very seam between self and other, between signification and meaning. In Kristeva's analysis, these seams of subjectivity are embodied in the subject at points where the interior and the exterior of the body connect. The excesses that flow from the body, that refuse the categories of inside

and outside, are the material of the abject: blood, excrement, mucus, vomit, pus; the means by which Cartesian stability is always undone. Abjection is, “...immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...”³⁸. The abject occupies the limits of the human universe, lying beyond the laws and discourses of subject/ object relations which claim to govern us:

On such limits and at the limit one could say that there is no unconscious...There is an effervescence of object and sign - not of desire but of intolerable significance; they tumble over into non-sense or the impossibly real, but they appear even so in spite of “myself” (which is not) as abjection.³⁹

Kristeva’s analysis of the abject’s interruption of the subject/object relationship demonstrates a similar process of interruption to that discussed by Derrida in “Aphorism Countertime”. The aphorism inhabits a similar field to that of the abject, exposing the space between the transfer of meaning and meaning itself as a site of perversion.

Kristeva’s discussion of abjection, however, is entitled Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection, a title which points out that the abject is itself a powerful tool against the kinds of powerlessness in representation that we find laid out in Kathy Acker’s Don Quixote. As a horror that contains power, the abject works like an aphorism, exposing Western culture’s “clean and proper body” as a paradox, whereby, in attempting to banish what is other within itself, the subject actually becomes provisional, open to breakdown and instability:

I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one they ferret out, emphasise, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is in this that they see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.⁴⁰

In her later fiction Kathy Acker explores the potential of the abject as a weapon against traditional representational modes. In Empire of the Senseless and In Memoriam to Identity she considers the possibilities of what she has called “nonpatriarchal language”⁴¹.

In an essay entitled “Critical Languages”, in fact, Acker finds models for such a language in the work of the Marquis de Sade, George Bataille and in the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return. In these examples of “nonpatriarchal language”, Acker argues, the power of the body and its excesses and wastes, the “... languages of flux...”⁴². destroy the Symbolic construct of “... Logos, the Platonic Head, the ruler...”⁴³. Such a language is the language of the body, and includes the following features:

1. ... the “I” (eye) [that] constantly changes. For the self is an “indefinite series of identities and transformations.”
2. The languages of wonder, not of judgement. The eye (I) is continuously seeing new phenomena, for, like sailors, we travel through the world, through our selves, through worlds
3. Languages which contradict themselves.
4. The languages of the material body: laughter, silence, screaming.
5. Scatology. That Laughter.
6. The languages of play: poetry ...
7. Language that announces itself as insufficient.
8. Above all: the languages of intensity. Since the body’s, our, end isn’t transcendence but excrement, the life of the body exists as pure intensity. The sexual and emotive languages.
9. The only religions are scatology and intensity.
10. Language that forgets itself. For if we knew that chance governs us and this world, that would be absolute knowledge.

Acker’s prescription for a nonpatriarchal language here could stand in for Derrida’s discussion of the aphoristic modality in “Aphorism Countertime”. Like Derrida, Acker draws attention to the multiple subject and “... the “I”/eye [that] constantly changes...””. She suggests that the fragmented self must speak against structures and foundations; and that, consequently, representation is embodied, that is, it rises out of the physicality of the

subject undermines the Cartesian mind/body split. Further, Acker's emblem for a representational practice is the sailor who, like the crew of the *Pequod* in Melville's Moby-Dick, must push out against the tide in order to gain a vantage point over the land-based self of foundational authority.

Acker's insistence on the possibilities of an embodied language underpins all of her work. Don Quixote foregrounds the relationship between representation and control and her quest is one which leads away from Cartesian subjectivity and towards the borders which separate self from other. Like Ishmael in Moby-Dick, she "hovers over Cartesian vortices"⁴⁴, exposed to the fragility of this subject position and the means by which its destruction might be performed. She constantly confronts the material of abjection as she navigates the scene of Western literature against which her quest is set. Don Quixote's confrontations with abjection and alterity echo the construction of the novel itself. Her quest is determined by the seminal writings of the Western tradition and the borders that occur between these texts. This inevitably leads her to her own borders and her identity is fragmented as foundational dualisms: self/other; legitimate/repressed; "I"/abject are wrenched apart.

Don Quixote begins in the middle of the protagonist's abortion. This experience casts her open to radical exposure, an exposure which immediately opens the way for an intolerable intermingling of the inside and the outside; the clean and the filthy. Here, Don Quixote loses her grasp on stability and submits to another mode of being; madness: "When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you're lying on your back and you do exactly as he and the nurse tell you to; finally blessedly, you let go of your mind.

Letting go your mind is dying.”⁴⁵ Abortion in the novel signifies the manner in which Don Quixote divorces herself from the Symbolic order. She makes her exit via the fissure between interior and exterior, becoming in the process, “...completely hole-ey.”⁴⁶ This loss of selfhood is, in one sense, a variety of death. In approaching the position where self and abject are reunited: the position of the deject, Don Quixote becomes the configuration of Kristeva’s paradigmatic symbol of abjection: the corpse, which is, she says:

...the most sickening of wastes ... a border that has encroached upon everything ... The border that has become object ... The corpse seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not want to part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.⁴⁷

Kristeva argues that in Western culture the corpse signifies the intolerable because it exists at the borders of life. In fact, it moves that border into the very centre of life itself. The corpse represents the superiority of the body, and the body’s final victory over reason or consciousness or language. The corpse attacks the stability of the ego insofar as it questions the extent to which the ego is able to control itself.

Through the affects of abortion, Don Quixote relinquishes her grasp on life. She gives herself up to the oscillating forces of alterity in order to determine the possibilities of living beyond present controls. To do this, she must die:

TO MYSELF: I was wrong to be right, to write, to be a knight, to try to do anything: because having a fantasy’s just living inside your own head. Being a fanatic separates you from other people ... When she had finally finished writing down all those smart teachings, being old and worn-out, she reaffirmed her belief that human love doesn’t exist and died.⁴⁸

Furthermore, while abortion draws Don Quixote towards the site of the corpse, it also separates her from the Symbolic in another way. After she has been opened up, her body reacts with bleeding and infection. She embodies abjection and so takes on the position of the maternal body as it is imagined in Powers of Horror. The maternal body, as Kristeva suggests, is a reminder of a subject's primary ties to its mother. Vaginal blood is this undeniable link made visible. In apprehending this blood, the subject is reminded of his or her unspeakable and unpayable debt of life to the maternal body. Female bleeding, then, throws the subject back to the scene of initial repression and, as Kristeva argues, the horror of menstruation, childbirth or abortion, (as in the case of Don Quixote), generates the most archaic of fears: "Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me towards respect for the body of the Other, my fellow man, my brother."⁴⁹

In an inversion of the same logic, Don Quixote loses her position as a "respected body of the Other" and becomes, instead, assimilated into the realm of the abject. Abortion pushes her closer to death and closer to the potential of her maternity. Not only is the interior other – Don Quixote's baby – terminated in her abortion, so too is her grasp on subjectivity. She becomes the paradigmatic abject body, discovering abjection in all of the texts across which her quest takes her. Lulu for example, demonstrates that abjection is perhaps the only way in which the excess of language might be heard. Lulu must murder Schön in order to "speak her own words"⁵⁰. Her language, like Don Quixote's, is that allowed by death; the language of the ruins of life. And later, in the scenes depicting "Dog School", the teacher advocates a return to the body as a way of learning and teaching:

All the accepted forms of education in this country, rather than teaching the child to know who she is or to know, dictate to the child who she is. Thus obfuscate any act of knowledge. Since these educators train the mind rather than the body, we can start with the physical body, the place of shitting and eating etc., to break through our opinions of false education.⁵¹

This is a small moment of sense-making in the teacher's general mode of speaking, however. For the most part, this teacher speaks in a constantly failing language where sentences are repeated endlessly and words themselves fail to signify. She enacts the break down of the subject and the fate of the Symbolic as it is confronted with the encroaching presence of the abject. In this, the "dog" and the "dog school" seem to offer some further way out. Don Quixote's own dog, St. Simeon, embodies a certain revolutionary potential and in the "dog school" this potential is increased in the wider community of dogs. The dogs are abject beings-in-process. The dog school schools its pupils in the modes and states of orgasm and in so doing, offers orgasm or bodily ecstasy – the excess of pleasure – as the site of revolution.

Lulu and the teacher offer alternative models for power in Don Quixote, more so, perhaps, than anything suggested by the failed quest of the central protagonist. This potential for a new way of speaking is further explored in Acker's later novel Empire of the Senseless, where a great deal more attention is paid to questions of politics and particularly to America's position within the later twentieth century world than seen in Don Quixote. In Empire of the Senseless the abject body becomes the scene of radical politics, the material from which Acker proposes to construct a weaponry against all received modes of power. It is, perhaps, an attempt to construct a different world, "... a belief, a myth. Somewhere real"⁵²; an alternative vision to that offered in Don Quixote

where that novel's hero essentially fails in her quest. Acker explains this further in

Empire of the Senseless:

Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language; to destroy language that normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack this empire-making (empirical) language, the prisons of meaning. But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions.⁵³

Her answer to this dilemma is to push out the walls of these "prisons of meaning" and attack what is normalised and sanctioned within language with what traditionally language forbids:

Thus an attack on the institutions of the prison via language would demand the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of code and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes: speaking precisely, that which the codes forbid break down the code.⁵⁴

In Empire of the Senseless, Acker advocates using the language of the body to break the codes of the Symbolic. Just as Don Quixote presents the connection between the internal and the external body as a way to escape fixed Western subject modalities, so too the taboo body is depicted in Empire of the Senseless as the epicentre of potential revolution. Recognising, with Kristeva, that abjection is both the necessary condition of the subject and what must be repressed by the subject in order to achieve wholeness within language, Acker suggests that it is on just this border between these separate but simultaneous states that the languages of taboo may be found. In Empire of the Senseless, then, Acker seeks to speak the underside of the Symbolic, to discover "Somewhere to go".

The world presented in Empire of the Senseless is the exploding and cynical world of late-twentieth century corporate, CIA America; a world structured into rigidity by the

insatiable demands of Daddy-Mr President-America. However, the first part of the book is entitled "Elegy to the World of the Fathers" and as such, demonstrates the final days of this old regime; the death-throes of the empire. Acker's version of Daddy-America is a brutally oedipal one where Abhor, the female hero of the novel, as yet unable to speak for herself, relates her childhood beginnings through the voice of her male counterpart Thivai. In this section of the book, Acker explores in detail the ground of Western oedipal structures and packages them into one emblem, that of the family. Thus, family relations stand in here for a range of other relations, not the least of which is the position and actions of America within the world. Daddy the rapist, the incestuous father, the torturer, the faithless husband operates like a nation state and in so doing, takes on all the qualities of one. Mother and Sister too act in accordance with Daddy's wishes and carry out their own brand of control over the seemingly powerless Abhor. Acker's presentation of the insatiable nature of late capitalist America owes much to Burroughs' descriptions of the State in Naked Lunch, with its binary machines to control its subjects, and also echoes something of Adams' figuring of America as the genesis of a radical materialism at the turn of the last century. Acker's text depicts, in a way, the logical trajectory of radical materialism. The force of the material inevitably leads to the ruin of its origins – capital – and the world that ensues is also one that is structured from and as ruin. Acker writes, then, the outcome of Adams' initial vision.

In contrast, Abhor dreams of being a terrorist in terms which denote a connection to the pre-oedipal world in which the family relations described are blown apart. The notion of a pre-oedipal state which exists outside the reach of language is central also to Kristeva's concept of the abject, and echoes similar notions in Nietzschean and Heideggerian

thought. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva argues for a pre-oedipal reality in the world of the infant. The relationship between mother and baby necessarily exceeds the relationship between the Symbolic and is driven along by the fluids of the body itself: blood, milk, excrement. Similarly, in Empire of the Senseless, the potency of the pre-oedipal is offered against the rule of Daddy and comes to Abhor in the form of dreams. In dreaming, she is able to step outside the constraints of fixed subjectivity and imagines herself far above that state, flying:

...I dreamed that the blood lying over the ocean in front of my eyes was light. The light by which I could see ... I knew that pleasure gathers only in freedom. For I was soaring though the sky, my huge white and grey wings stretched to the horizontal limits of my vision ... In the sky. I was almost white.⁵⁵

As Abhor's story progresses, so too does her desire to return to the site of pre-oedipal childhood. Her dreams and visions accelerate, propelling her towards the hairline fracture separating self and abject and she finally becomes a figure representing what Kristeva calls "the deject": "A devisor of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of the non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh."⁵⁶ Towards the end of "Elegy to the Fathers", as Abhor is raped by her father, she finally appears to reach this position becoming the embodied signifier of excess; ruptured and decentred, splintering into madness and hysteria. However, it is in this embodiment that Abhor assumes the power to speak for herself in the language, she says, of the terrorist pirate sailor; the language of the "powers of horror".

The second part of Empire of the Senseless describes a world which reflects Abhor's newly born powers of horror. The backdrop here is a Genet-esque Paris in which the

Other, represented as Algeria, has taken over Western civilisation. This section of the novel is a cacophony of horror: unconnected and confusing descriptions of war, rape and murder, as told by the deject Abhor and Thivai, a matricidal escapee. This is the world, unfettered by the Symbolic gone mad. It is literally hell: the absence of God the Father. In hell, all oppositions that define civilisation fade and disintegrate. Thus, criminality and terrorism define a non-oedipal world. If language is the prison and Daddy the jailer, then the meaning-less world of abjection is its dialectical antithesis. Acker does not construct an other-world in which oedipal dynamics are displaced by the utopia of the Imaginary. Rather, as she shows, such a place cannot be imagined as anything but hell by a writer who must still be confined by language. However, within this world Abhor seeks to go further still into the centre of criminality. She frequently refers to the possibilities that going away to sea as a sailor might bring. Here, as we have already seen in Moby-Dick, the sea represents a distancing from the constraints of all earth-bound dialectics and the sailor is the embodied possibility of such a place. Abhor recognises the sailor at sea as a threat to all received forms of discourse and social constraints because, as she says: "Though the sailor longs for home, her or his real love is change. Stability in change, change occurs only imaginarily. No roses grow on sailors' graves."⁵⁷ Acker's use of the sailor motif resonates with the position of sailors in Moby-Dick. The sea and the sailor here and in Melville's writing offer the possibility of getting "out of time" in order to escape the boundaries placed around being by the demands of Cartesian ontology.

It is the prospect of "stability in change" offered in the figure of the errant sailor that is the focus of the third section of Empire of the Senseless, "Pirate Night". Here, Acker offers an alternative version of being that is centred around the paradigmatic outward

mark of the sailor; the tattoo, which is offered in the text as a potential “other world” for the deject self to go. Traditionally, in Western cultures the tattoo signifies a separation of the wearer from the “normal” social milieu. The tattooed body might be considered exotic or criminal, not generally fit for normal human apprehension. The tattoo may also only be revealed to those who can enter into the hermeneutics that it implies.

Furthermore, in the act of tattooing or being tattooed, the body becomes abject as the tattooist’s needle drips with blood and the inside and outside of the body merge.

As the central motif of power in Empire of the Senseless, the tattoo is a possible escape route out of the topography of the American State-Family apparatus, as it has spread and colonised every part of the world. Daddy-America and those who his authority bears down upon are shown here to have gone global. Even a world defined as “not Daddy”, the hellish Algerian Paris of “Alone” is simply the inversion of the world of the Fathers as it is described in section one of the novel. Through the tattoo, however, Acker imagines a new language and another way of writing another kind of world. As Abhor recognises, the tattoo documents “... abstract maps of spiritual visions, records of the “other world ... icons of power and mystery designating realms beyond normal land-dwellers experience ...”⁵⁸

V

Acker’s emphasis on the tattooed body as a place from which an alternative subjectivity might emerge draws us back to Moby-Dick and Ishmael’s first look at Queequeg’s tattooed flesh. Like Melville, Acker’s work questions contemporaneous notions of identity and representation. And like Melville, these investigations necessarily take on radical forms. Moby-Dick, with its digressive and encyclopedic structure, finds its late

twentieth century counterpart in the “samples” and plagiarisms of Acker’s texts. As well, her relentless appropriation of supposed autobiographical detail stands at the opposite end of the century to Adams’ similar use of this form, but resonates with the same sense of foreboding. Both writers cast their eyes over an abyss in which the subject is reduced to automaton and the topography of culture is flattened by the weight of the popular. The relentless reign of the popular is reflected in the proliferation of signifiers in Acker’s texts and stands also in direct lineage to Kerouac’s and Burroughs’ first outlining of an emerging popular space during the fifties. Like Kerouac and Burroughs, the strategies and preoccupations of Acker’s work place her within an aphoristic genealogy which traces along the underside of American writing. In Acker’s writing these strategies include the blurring of genres and the collapse of theory into fiction or, perhaps more specifically, fiction into theory, as well as her attempts to write the space-off along the seams of appropriated master-narratives. These strategies also encompass Acker’s complex and obsessive self-plagiarism, right down to the last words she set to the page before her death, and her treatment of the oedipal family construct as it continues to determine the dynamics of America itself. Thus, the excesses of Acker’s writing are the excesses of aphorism, those elements which exceed the Name. These excesses are produced in her work in the central emblems of the tattoo and the sailor, two images which underpin Acker’s own project to reject foundational grounds where the codes of being are set and maintained, in order to, in Pound’s words: “Sail[...] after knowledge knowing less than the drugged beasts”⁵⁹, towards a site of utter alterity, the unimaginable.

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Conclusions: An Anti-Foundational Constitution

I

By searching out origins, one becomes a crab. The historian looks backward; eventually he also believes backward.

Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols

Genealogy...opposes itself as a search for origins....It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity...

Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History"

Nietzsche's image of the historian as a backward scurrying crab is a warning to anyone intending to embark upon a search for origins. The myopic and reactive nature of historical collation, its quest to find an order or a meaning in primary data that might then be imposed on the world beyond it, signals the inherently reductive nature of such a task. On the other hand, Foucault's notion of genealogy, which he says "rejects the metaphysical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies"¹ reveals that a different kind of historicising is possible. Genealogy's duty is to disrupt stable structures with matter discarded in the search for order. This study has read the work of Melville, Adams, Kerouac, Burroughs and Acker as a genealogy of the anti-foundational impulse in American literature, rather than as an historical search for origins. Like all genealogies, this one has been based on the identification of common traits, in terms of the formal narratological strategies at work within the texts, their paradigmatic concerns, and their nexus with the conditions from which they emerge. These textual strategies which have been demarcated, following Derrida, as aphoristic, employ a fragmentary modality. In so doing, they produce discordance and atonality which, in turn, disrupts orthodox reading strategies. This assault on traditional methods of representation, subsequently brings the construction of subjectivity to the fore. Indeed, in their

disruption of contemporaneous subject positions and their gesturing at alternate ones, signalled by the music of *contretemps*, these texts reveal the seams of Western subjectivity as they record the transportation of this subjectivity from the modern to the postmodern scene.

Certain questions remain, however, as to what this genealogy can tell us about the backdrop from which it emerges, in particular, the cultural and rhetorical fabric of America. To answer these questions we must turn from this endpoint back to first principles (as opposed to origins). At least this is the strategy employed by Acker's Don Quixote as she nears the end of her quest and demands: "First, how did America begin? What are the myths of the beginning of America?"² What follows this request is an aphoristic series of "answers". These answers take the form of cryptic and subversive reversals of the American mythos and an unpicking of its rhetorical seams. Yet, they also sum up many of the main strands of the genealogy constructed here and some of the conclusions we might elicit from them.

II

*Answer: The desire for religious intolerance made America or freedom.*³

Don Quixote's explication of the Puritan origins of America is an inversion of the received founding story of religious tolerance. The Puritans left England, she argues, not because they were persecuted and wanted freedom of worship but "...because they, and more importantly, their neighbours weren't forced to live as rigidly in religious terms as they wanted."⁴ To Acker's protagonist's mind, theology and politics took place in America as praxis, not as theory as had been the case in the "Mother Country."⁵ As

evidence, Don Quixote relates the story of the torture of two young men for preaching Quakerism in New England in 1656, noting that "In 1658, the Massachusetts House Deputies passed the Death Penalty against Quakers."⁶

This deconstruction of the Puritan myth that valorises the founding fathers' determination to seek out religious tolerance in the New World, reveals that indeed America is founded on freedom. However, this version of freedom is not of the variety that propels the liberal rhetorical lexicon. Rather, Don Quixote argues that the freedom held dear by the Puritans was the freedom to deny freedom through the radical and violent transition from theology into praxis. Like Sacvan Bercovitch, Acker discerns the connection between the New England Meeting-House, its pulpit and the CIA. However, unlike Bercovitch who sees the jeremiad as a somewhat empty threat circulated in the effort to hew self-reliance from the raw material of the Puritan mind, Acker connects the mythos and the modus of the Puritans, their language and culture, with a sinister and all-pervasive pursuit for control over the Other at all costs.

The presence of a conjoined domineering and a dominated subjectivity, structured within this rhetorical claim of freedom, has recurred throughout the texts of this genealogy. In each work, we find a central organising consciousness that is thrown into disarray when the remains of the sublimated subject resurfaces, as it inevitably must do under the law by which the dominant is allowed its rule. This return of the defiled remains of the subject, that which is other to it, sounds a key note in these texts and its entry often occurs in violence and always brings with it the undoing of the fictional world being constructed.

In Moby-Dick, the murderous quest of Captain Ahab against the lurking presence of the White Whale forms the central fictional thread of the text. Ahab stands as the dominating figure in the dialectic of control that Acker isolates. He represents the Western subject in its most extreme state. Pip, the Black cabin boy from Alabama, is his antithesis. Pip, whose final loss is the ability to speak, takes on the position of the Eastern Other in the text and is finally “abandoned” at sea to a madness wrought from his vision of a formless world where everything is “multitudinous, God-omnipresent”.⁷ By contrast, Melville locates the narrator Ishmael in an alternative subject position that forms the counter-beat to this dialectic of the dominant and dominated. In relating the story of the *Pequod*’s journey from beyond the final scene of the novel, Ishmael’s voice is that of the being who is able to speak from out of the ruins of subjectivity and who finds some escape in the possibilities of other modes of speaking and being, specifically those represented in the figure of Queequeg, his tattooed consort.

In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams, like Acker, is concerned with the mechanics of control that drive the founding discourses of America. As a member of the Anglo-American aristocracy, Adams’ “education” is set against his traditions and inheritances. Its lessons radically undercut his own lineage’s investment in the value of classical knowledge and instead, reveal the sublimation of all such knowledge systems to the thrust of force. An early example of the dominant/dominated dialectic is established in Adams’ discussion of his heritage. As a member of the Bostonian ruling elite, his inheritance is one of power and authority. This, we assume, will form the dominant position within the power continuum. However, in The Education of Henry Adams, the dichotomy of dominance is formed in the contrast between the material world,

represented in the emblem of the dynamo, and the figure of the manikin, whose status is as a model “on which the toilet of education is to be draped”. Adams’ great line of American aristocracy is devalued by the ascendancy of the object over the subject. By definition, the dynamo is always in motion, however, the manikin, is static and is acted upon. In this opposition, Adams perceives that modernity will be constructed by the forces of materialism, and not by the forces of liberal humanism. Henry Adams’ position is that of the receding and collapsing human subject. His voice belongs properly to the disembodied manikin. It speaks as the dead author/subject whose nostalgia for order is parodic and self-derisive.

William Burroughs’ Naked Lunch maintains a similar focus on the defiled subject of modernity. Here, the subject is revealed to be constructed and controlled by language, and Dr. Benway’ authority over the linguistic field. The subject in Naked Lunch struggles to make connections between the disparate referents that proliferate the Interzone, is imprisoned by its endlessly churning binary machines, and is bewildered by and finally disgraced by its own documentation. Burroughs’ vision of the subject is the same as it (ever) was in America’s rhetorical beginnings: a disciplined subject of rhetorical discourse who is formed and restrained within the order of language. On the other hand, Kerouac’s Eastern-facing subject of The Dharma Bums has a transcendent Melvillian echo in its search for epiphany beyond the dualisms of language. The forms of Eastern poetics that Kerouac attempts to write into the codes of Western representation, such as the *haiku* and the *koan*, operate against logic and require the reader to leap and jump between signifiers in a way which interrupts the flow of mimetic fiction. The self that is elicited from Kerouac’s work equally fails to signify a logical presence but in so

doing, seems to offer an alternative non-dualistic possibility for being, gestured at already by Melville in the figure of Ishmael.

Kathy Acker's work also speculates on possible routes out of the subject/object duality. In Don Quixote and Empire of the Senseless, Acker establishes that the most crucial duality is between the Mind and the Body, and so locates her writing at the site of the body, as if to write or speak that site. The subjects of Acker's work are sublimated to the rule of the Mind. The Mind is demarcated "Daddy" or "America" or other dominant signifiers, while the Body may be "Algeria" or "Dog" or other dominated signifiers. These "others" are disciplined and punished by the insatiable desire of dominant authorities to control their material selves, their bodies. And so it is the body that offers the most revolutionary potential for a way out of originary dualities. In Don Quixote, the dog school suggests this potential in its image of a community of others whose language is that of ecstasy. In Empire of the Senseless, an exit is given in the emblem of the tattoo, which, as an alterior language written on the body, returns us to a similar site of potential in Moby-Dick, that marked out by Queequeg's tattoo.

III

Answer: American freedom was the supremacy of technology over ideology.⁸

In her second interrogation of American foundations, Acker's Don Quixote claims that the early New Englanders were more concerned with the organisation and effectiveness of their society, than by its nature and overall determination. She suggests that the theological praxis of the fledgling state thus elided the true mechanics of its nature – the

supremacy of technology. Technology, underpinning the true function of “humanitie, Civilitie, and Christianitie”⁹, was the means by which order could be maintained:

‘To every dog its place and proportion without impeachment and Infringement hath ever bene and will ever be the tranquillitie and Stabilitie of Churches and Commonwealths.’ Individual libertie or behavior must be modulated for the sake of the institutions of the state.¹⁰

In this elision of the mechanisms of technology over the individual within the rhetoric of “humanitie, Civilitie, and Christianitie”, however, Don Quixote notes also that “There is a straine in a dog’s heart that will sometime or other runne out to excess.”¹¹

An understanding of the radical potential of excess fundamentally informs the literature contained within this genealogy. Each work reveals a view of the Western Being, decentred, dispersed or lost to the buffetings of material forces, yet shows that in some way, those elements elided or suppressed by the rule of reason or metaphysics, will always have their vengeance. Within this genealogy is a line that runs from Melville’s inquiry into monomania, to Acker’s interrogations of nuclear power. Indeed, a radical materialist reading of Moby-Dick could argue that it is the oil of the sperm whale that is the driving force of the novel, just as Adams sees coal and electricity driving *fin-de-siècle* culture in The Education of Henry Adams. In Gravity’s Rainbow, another work that might fit, at least in part, into this genealogy, Herr Rathenau explains radical materialism:

All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic... If you want the truth... you must look into the technology or these matters. Even into the hearts of certain molecules – it is they, afterall, which dictate temperatures, pressures, rates of flow, costs, profits, the shape of towers...¹²

In the “hearts of certain molecules”, then, or in other words, in the material not the human, lies the truth about history. History is propelled through the energy of tools and

technologies, and is shaped by forces not forms. In each of the texts of this genealogy, foundational notions of human progress are tested and found lacking, either implicitly in the works' narrative structures, as we see in Melville's broken narrative voice or Kerouac's turn to the East, or explicitly in their paradigmatic meditations on history and time, as we see in Adams' "Dynamic Progress of History", Burroughs' collapsed spacio-temporal Interzone and Acker's post-Apocalyptic Paris. This overflow of time into excess further exposes the decentred position of the subject in two key ways. Firstly, in the implicit alternative constructions of subjectivity encountered in Melville's and Kerouac's work, and secondly, in the explicit transgressions being enacted by Adams as the manikin, or Burroughs as the paranoid junkie, or Acker as the half-woman-half robot, Abhor in Empire of the Senseless.

This second article of faith, then, the supremacy of technology over ideology, reveals that the physical and rhetorical construction of America is contingent on the complicity between technology, material and economy. And, that the construction of a progressive and symbolic American narrative is just that – a construction, ultimately, a fiction.

IV

*Answer: Freedom and money must be intertwined.*¹³

Again, Don Quixote relates a *faux* New England history to demonstrate her third originary truth of America: the complicity between American capital and democracy. On a broader level, and imperative to our analysis, her explication of this complicity points out the intimate relations between American cultural production and the flow of money. This complicity is signalled throughout these aphoristic texts in narrative methods and

paradigmatic concerns. Each work in some way demonstrates a collapse in key hierarchical categories of cultural production and its liberally supposed independence.

In Moby-Dick, Melville's fragmentary fictional strategy, which splices together mundane encyclopedic fact, Puritan rhetoric, popularist modalities and high flown dramatic soliloquy, is the limen through which later experimentations in form must pass. Here, the divisional borders between genre, voice and form are destabilised in their unorthodox arrangements and intertextual jostlings. High and low modes are placed together in this contested textual field. The result is a form which calls into question the validity and deployment of originary divisions and points to their complicity in the cause of wider agendas of thinking, writing and Being.

In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams recognises that the collapsing distinctions between knowledge and energy, education and capital, being and matter, will necessarily call forth a new version of subjectivity from the old; a subject elicited from the forces of production and the material. For Adams, this subject is corporate and mass; it is the multiple subject necessary for a multiple world. The endlessly circling forces of the dynamo are also those of cultural production in the age of the machine. The resulting subjectivity invoked is therefore, mechanistic and mass-produced.

In the work of Kerouac and Burroughs, the relationship between cultural production and capital is further problematised by their wholesale disintegration of high and low representational modes. This is not to suggest that either Kerouac or Burroughs were complicit with the forces of capitalism, but rather, that their work writes the conditions of

this complicity as it was being enacted in wider cultural spheres. Both Burroughs and Kerouac transport the codes of popular discourse: film techniques, comic strip devices, photography and jazz into the high culture context of the literary text. In so doing, they disrupt the master codes of both high and low categories. The consequence of this is a disruption that resonates from the surface and method of the texts through to their ontological and epistemological depths. These strategies result in the emergence of new textual spaces, marked “pop” yet functioning as “art”, as well as a range of possibilities for subjectivity. In Kerouac, the pop subject is imbued with possibility and power. In Burroughs, however, the pop subject is caught within the fragments of its construction.

In Acker’s work, the intertextual space that emerges when the modes of high and low discourse are collapsed is radicalised further. Acker not only lets the popular in to the field of the literary text, but she also calls forth the abject, the pornographic, and the plagiarised for deployment in the construction of art. In her use of cut up writing, Acker’s work announces its relationship to Burroughs. However, in her plagiarism she pushes this modality to extremes. Plagiarism breaks the law of ownership, which is intrinsic to the functioning of American capitalism. In her contempt for property laws and copyright, Acker not only transgresses literary hierarchies, but she also exposes the means by which these artistic hierarchies are used in the service of economic interests. Acker’s employment of these “criminal” strategies further attests to her position at the flailing end of this genealogy of the anti-foundational American text.

Aphorism, as this study has demonstrated, has been the dominant mode of these texts; and *contretemps* their *leitmotif*. And while these disruptive strategies are evident throughout this chronicle, each responds to a specific set of contemporaneous orthodoxies. It goes without saying, therefore, that the radical literary practice of the 1850s is the long assimilated convention of the 1990s. Fragmented forms, collapsed generic boundaries and decentred subjects located within the linguistic field are the conventions, even the *traditions* of postmodern fictional strategies. What is left for Kathy Acker at the end of the genealogy of American aphorism, then, is to take this orthodoxy and remorselessly rip it to shreds.

Acker's task here is contingent on the fact that the conventions of radical fiction located throughout this study, have been increasingly assimilated into the rhetorical and representational conventions of late capitalist discourse. Corporate or institutional documents are written as if they were pieces of postmodern fiction in their fragmentary and neological lexicons, their absent or indiscriminate narrative voices, and their mood of spatio-temporal collapse and paranoia. More obviously, the pithy slogans of advertising, with their extortions for "best practice" behaviour: "Just Do It", "Go With the Flow", "Be Some Body", identify themselves as instances of aphorism; hands in the margins pointing out the essential message contained within, we presume, the product. These corporate aphorisms draw attention to themselves as late capitalist guiding truths; rhetorical markers of the material field that have been constructed in the narratological strategies of radical fiction.

One obvious and resonant example of the entwinement between radical art and corporate discourse is Burroughs' penultimate appearances during the 1990s fronting a Spike Lee directed advertising campaign for Nike™. This convergence of American artistic celebrity onto the screen or the billboard of the product, in effect, turns the self, Burroughs, into the signifier of the product; a mediation that reveals late capitalism's valorisation of the "creative" (as in the advertising "creative", or the financial "creative"). Here the "creative", Burroughs, is one more position from which to speak the rhetoric of late capitalism's moral truths, in this case "Just Do It".

The subsumption and consumption of radical art by corporate interests is in no way a new insight. Indeed, much of the work of the Frankfurt School was bound up in determining the machinations that allowed art to be placed into the services of hegemony. However, as earlier discussions of neo-Marxism here have contended, dialectics themselves cannot fully explain the commodification of art works by capitalist interests, because dialectics remain anchored to rational categories of progress and being. What is happening when art and late capitalism collide in rhetoric, then, is not the synthesis of the dialectic process, but rather, a continued demonstration that in America, art, capital and rhetoric were always connected under the sign of aphorism.

¹ Foucault, M. Nietzsche, Genealogy and History, quoted in Carroll, D. The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p109

² Acker, K. Don Quixote, London: Paladin, 1986, p117

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, pp117-118

⁵ Ibid, 117

⁶ Ibid, p118

⁷ Ibid, p383-384

⁸ Ibid, p118

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Pynchon, T. Gravity's Rainbow, London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p

¹³ Acker, K. Don Quixote, London: Paladin, 1986, p119

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